

Brass on the Move: Economic Crisis and Professional Mobility among Romani Musicians in Vranje¹

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Introduction

Since Ottoman times, Romani musicians in the Balkans have monopolized the professional performance of music (Pettan 2002; Silverman 1996; Silverman 2007). Despite the historical stigma surrounding this profession in the region (Sugarman 2003), Roma have used musical performance to enhance their economic and sociocultural status. Romani entertainers through the centuries have developed, maintained, and spread musical repertoires of diverse ethnic and confessional communities, and as such popular stereotypes and discourses in the Balkans even today strongly link Roma to musical performance. Specifically, stereotypes of the “inherent abilities” and “genetic predisposition” of Roma for musical performance both reinforce their domination of this musical niche and reproduce the specific power relations that inform patron-client relations in performance contexts (Pettan 2002; van de Port 1998; van de Port 1999). As Romani musical skills become increasingly famous on the World Music market, the connections between Romani identity and musical performance are imbued with even more complex meanings as musicians attempt to expand their economic and social prospects in new potential performance contexts (Silverman 2007). Romani brass music from southern Serbia and Macedonia, in particular, is at the center of the growing craze for Balkan Romani “beats” on a global scale.

In light of the multi-faceted importance of musical performance for Romani economic and cultural status, this work explores the ramifications of recent political and economic crises in Vranje, Serbia, for the status of professional Romani musicians in the region. Vranje’s Romani community has a particularly rich history of musical performance in the region, and the historical predominance of Romani musicians is famous throughout Serbia as a result of the literary works of Bora Stanković. Strong economic conditions and Vranje’s specific cultural context have historically provided Romani musicians with an important entertainment niche in the region. With the breakup of the former

¹ This preliminary analysis stems from my ongoing PhD research (Dept. of Anthropology, University of Illinois-Chicago) on the relationship between Romani identity and musical performance. Field research I conducted in Vranje over a 9 month period in 2009-2010 was funded by an IARO grant from the IREX Foundation. Earlier short trips into the field were made possible by the UIC Dept. of Anthropology’s Charles Reed Fund (2007) and the UIC Graduate College’s Provost Award (2008).

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Yugoslavia, however, a chain of political, economic, and social upheavals in the region have affected the viability of this occupational niche for Vranje's Roma. In response, Vranje's brass musicians increasingly turn to new opportunities further abroad. As a new culture of working migrations develops among these brass musicians, new discourses about performance, prestige, and identity are being created to negotiate the specific challenges of changing socioeconomic conditions in Serbia. To better understand these processes, this work compares Romani musical performance in Vranje in Socialist Yugoslavia with the current conditions of Romani professional entertainers in the wake of the Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s.

Tito's Era: "The Golden Years" (1960s - 1980s)

Vranje's inhabitants are often highly nostalgic about life in the former Yugoslavia. In the course of my research, participants from both Romani and Serb communities in the area regularly praised the living conditions in the country prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia. Locals argue that people were able to "really live" in the relative security of the nation's economy at the time, certain of having access to jobs, regular pay, and protected by a controlled standard of living that allowed them to maximize the use of their earnings. Vranje residents attribute the financial plenty and social stability in those "golden years" to the rule of Marshal Tito (and later, Slobodan Milošević) under the Socialist regime. Among others, Roma musicians also fondly remember higher earnings and greater respect for their role as professional entertainers in the former Yugoslavia.

Industrialization and Economic Stability in Vranje

During the Socialist period, the city of Vranje was transformed by government projects into an industrial powerhouse. Several major state-run firms in the city employed a large number of locals from the wider Vranje region. As such, the process of industrialization increased employment opportunities and provided new incomes for workers in the area. Roma and Serbs alike remember that many in their respective communities were employed in the *YUMCO* cotton industry, *SIMPO*'s furniture manufacturing plant, Vranje's *DIV* tobacco-processing giant, or the *KOŠTANA* shoe-making factory. Often, informants stressed that entire extended families might be employed within a single firm, as younger members sought or were granted jobs in the same factories that employed their elder relatives. Alongside the majority Serb population, Roma were also "guaranteed" certain jobs in these factories. While these Roma were

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usually employed in menial positions that were less desirable to Serbs², many Roma explained that their very induction into these factory workforces improved the range of labor opportunities available to their community in the city. In addition, factory work provided steady wages and benefits that were considered preferable to the less secure incomes garnered in the context of other work customarily undertaken by Roma, such as the resale of foodstuffs or apparel in open-air “pijac” markets³. Even as these factory jobs drew increasing numbers of Serbs from outlying villages, these same institutions also slowly opened new spaces for Vranje’s Roma to enter more “mainstream” spheres of economic activity.

This period of industrialization in Vranje meant that locals from all ethnic backgrounds enjoyed a significant degree of financial security. Widespread employment, stable earnings, and a controlled living standard allowed most of Vranje’s population to comfortably meet the basic needs of their families. Moreover, this strong financial situation also allowed people to partake in “luxury” activities beyond the scope of everyday expenses. Many in Vranje boast that their families were able to build brand new homes or expand existing dwellings from the salaries they earned during this industrial boom. Others noted that people were in a better position to travel for leisure purposes, regularly taking summer vacations to the Adriatic and Aegean seacoasts. Significantly, these regular incomes also provided residents with the means to “go out on the town” in Vranje with their families and friends. At the time, Vranje was well-known in the region for the number and quality of its restaurants, taverns, and hotel accommodations. Local Serbs in particular speak of the “good old days” when groups of friends would share meals, drink, and enjoy good music and dancing at such establishments. Informants stressed that musical entertainment was one of the most important aspects of these venues, and it provided both the context and the means for social relationships to be constructed and maintained between locals. Vranje residents were said to be famous for their distinguished taste in music, and locals comment that visitors

² Local Serbs indicated that Roma were often hired to do the work that many Serbs would refuse to undertake in these factories. As such, many Roma were engaged to clean factory floors, gather excess material from production lines, clean bathrooms and mess halls, load and unload trucks, or to act as guards and night watchmen for factory property. Serb informants often characterized these jobs specifically as low-class (as well as low wage) work. Although some Roma were employed in more skilled types of functions, such as tailors or machine operators, locals’ comments seem to indicate that this was a smaller percentage of the total Roma workforce in these factories.

³ Several Serb informants in Vranje explicitly linked these activities to Roma during this time period, insisting that most Serbs at the time considered this to be low prestige work that was beneath most city denizens. As such, many indicated that Serbs would be highly embarrassed to find themselves in a position where they were forced to sell clothing on the streets to make ends meet.

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would come from Skopje, Kosovo, or even as far away as Belgrade to experience “*kako se Vranjanci vesele*”⁴. The value attached to musical entertainment during this period is evident in the detailed way that locals even today describe these establishments and events. Older residents note that the famous Bakija Bakić brass orchestra performed every Monday evening in the outdoor garden of the *Hotel Vranje* during the summer months; entire families would dress in their best and sit in the garden to dine together with other families, reveling in the songs and dance tunes that Bakija’s ensemble would play for patrons throughout the evening. In addition, the gardens of the *Hotel Pržar*⁵ and of the *Dom JNA* were popular places to enjoy music and to dance during warm summer evenings. The large indoor halls of establishments like *Kafana Evropa* were also regularly filled with patrons seeking good music to accompany evening dinners, particularly during the colder winter months. As one of the main attractions at such leisure venues, professional musicians provided a valued service that was integral to the social and cultural life of Vranje. Because financial conditions were so stable in Vranje at the time, moreover, residents of the town could afford to regularly spend money on these evenings dedicated to social leisure.

As industry expanded in Vranje, increasingly favorable economic conditions also enabled locals to hold elaborate family celebrations with live musicians. Major rites of passage such as the birth of a child, baptisms, serving one’s obligatory military service, and weddings were marked by celebrations that traditionally require professional musical entertainment. Wedding celebrations in particular are elaborate events in local culture⁶, customarily taking place over the course of some two or three days and involving large numbers of invited kin and friends. The cost of putting on these events was often significant as hosts were obligated to provide ample food and drink to their guests throughout. Although families often held such festivities in their courtyards, basements, or even in the streets in front of their homes, over time many chose to take on the additional expense of renting out halls in local hotels or restaurants for these celebratory banquets. Despite being only one of myriad expenses during these celebrations, good music was often considered among the most essential of services required of host families. Significantly, important ritual moments during celebrations like the wedding ceremony are almost always accompanied by Romani brass bands. For example, wedding festivities

⁴ In translation, to see “how Vranje’s people let loose”.

⁵ Particularly popular among businessmen and directors of local factories because of the garden’s „birds-eye view“ on the entire city, spread below the hotel’s position located a short way up the Pljačkovica mountain above Vranje.

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the wedding ritual among Serbs in Vranje, see: Zlatanović, Sanja (2003) *Svadba: Priča o identitetu*. Beograd: Etnografski Institut SANU.

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formally begin with the dance known as *Svekrvino Kolo*⁷, where the groom's mother leads the dance line while symbolically holding a decorated sieve in her extended right hand. Roma and Serbs alike in Vranje stress that it is unthinkable for this dance to take place without live brass music to accompany it. As the ritual continues, specific songs are requested by other important guests who take their turn leading the dance line in order to express their joy while participating in the wedding ceremony. Informants often proudly exclaim that such musical accompaniment continued day and night for the entire three-day course of such elaborate celebrations. In addition to its ritual function, musical entertainment was also important because it allowed guests to fully enjoy themselves at these significant moments in the family's collective life. By dancing, singing, and gifting money to the musicians, guests showed their emotional involvement in the family's life and demonstrated their appreciation of their relationship with their hosts. The lavishness of the event and the "good mood" of the guests at such celebrations earned significant cultural capital for the host family. Such events were discussed at length among town residents, and locals ensured that the celebrations they threw in turn would be suitably impressive. Many informants stressed, however, that families at the time were also not incredibly concerned about the lavish amounts of money and effort that these celebrations required. It is evident from local's stories about these events that the economic plenty and political stability of the time provided the means for them to nurture these strikingly elaborate cultural phenomena in which professional musicians were of central importance.

Professional Musicians in the Time of Plenty

As a result of this economic security, Romani musicians indicate that these decades were the peak of their professional prowess in the town. The vast majority of the musicians that were engaged for celebrations in the wider Vranje region were Roma; in fact, most locals claim that there were very few Serbian professional musicians active in the area. Musicians were nearly always hired from one of several Romani *mahalas*⁸ in the region, such as the

⁷ Literally translates to "the dance of the groom's mother" in Serbian.

⁸ The term *mahala* is used in various derivations to indicate specific neighborhoods in settlements where Roma are the majority of the residents. A loan word from Arabic, this word was long used in the Ottoman Empire to designate quarters occupied by a distinct ethnic or occupational group, i.e., "terzi mahala" (tailor's mahala). In Serbia today, the term *mahala* (or *mala*) is exclusively used to refer to Romani neighborhoods. Vranje itself has 3 main mahalas: *Gornja Čaršija*, *Sarajina*, and *Panađurište*, while the populations of the latter two settlements have also spread into the growing neighborhoods of *Dedinje* and *Raška*, respectively. Vranjska Banja has 3 mahalas known for their musicians, namely *Saglameci* and *Burdinci* nearer the center of the settlement, and *Ogoš-Gramađa* in "lower" Banja. The

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oldest and largest Roma settlement in Vranje, *Gornja Čaršija*. Romani musicians comprised an extremely diverse category of professionals that performed various distinct genres. Overall, Romani musicians maintained two basic types of ensemble in this period. The first of these genres is generally referred to as *kafanska muzika* in Vranje, and was the prevalent entertainment in restaurants, cafes, and hotel guest halls. Ensembles usually consisted of clarinet, one or two accordions, violin, guitar, bass cello, and a drum set⁹ or the *tarabuka*¹⁰ (also known as the *darbuk*). These *kafana* ensembles maintained diverse repertoires of songs in order to cater to different audiences depending on the specific context of their performances. They were able to perform Western and “modern” music for non-local guests in hotel halls, play patriotic songs at banquets to send off young men for military service, or perform folk songs from “old Vranje” for patrons at local restaurants and in theater productions of the works of Bora Stanković. Musical versatility made this type of ensemble widely popular both in Vranje and in cities beyond, and a significant proportion of the active Romani musicians in the region at the time performed in this type of ensemble because of widespread demand for the genre.

Brass orchestras¹¹ comprise the other major musical genre commonly found in Vranje. Brass bands in southern Serbia are comprised almost exclusively of Romani musicians, and this genre of music has been completely monopolized by Roma for nearly 100 years in the Vranje area (Milovanović and Babić 2003). Brass bands usually consist of some 10 to 14 musicians, usually comprising 3 or 4 trumpets (*trube*), 3 or 4 tenor horns (*mali basovi*), one tuba (*veliki bas*), one large drum (*goč*), at times a snare drum (*doboš*), and usually also either a single clarinet or saxophone. Compared with the *kafana* ensembles, brass bands performed within a more specific musical context during this period. Brass orchestras are traditionally hired to entertain at weddings, with both Romani and Serb communities in the region relying on the same pool of musicians to accompany the ritual and celebratory activities that accompany these elaborate festivities. At times, brass may also be engaged to perform for military send-off banquets and other family celebrations. In

village of Pavlovac just south of Vranje is also known for its musicians, and there is a single Romani mahala in the settlement.

⁹ The drum set is also referred to as *džez bubnjevi* (jazz drums) in Vranje.

¹⁰ The *tarabuka* is an hourglass-shaped handheld drum. Often linked to the music of the Levant, it was especially widely used in musical ensembles throughout urban spaces during the Ottoman period. The *tarabuka* is closely associated with the musical culture of southeastern Serbia, as are many other instruments and musical styles that are popularly perceived to have Oriental/Turkish and Romani influences.

¹¹ Brass bands in Vranje are often referred to as *trubači*; somewhat less frequently, locals also use the terms *pleh*, *pleh muzika*, or *duvački orkestri*.

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particular, brass bands have always been preferred for large outdoor events. Prior to the widespread availability of amplification technology, brass bands were the only ensembles loud enough to accompany outdoor events; this also meant that the musicians were not tied to microphones and power sources, and therefore were free to move around with celebrants and to accompany mobile wedding processions. This link between brass music and the specific traditions of local family celebrations has also heavily impacted their musical repertoires. Brass bands are usually associated in local discourse with older folk songs and dance tunes that are “authentic” to this region and local culture. The sound of brass music is thus particularly important in discourses about local culture. Many informants emphasized that no celebration could take place without the beating of the large *goč* drum, and women in particular commented that the sound of the drum beating inevitably “causes goosebumps” or “butterflies in the stomach” from sheer excitement! Because of their cultural and “sonic” importance, as such, brass bands have enjoyed great popularity in this region of Serbia for most of the 20th century.

Whether performing in *kafana* orchestras or in brass ensembles, Vranje’s Romani musicians experienced no shortage of work during the Socialist period in the former Yugoslavia. Musicians in particular emphasize that there was great demand for professional entertainers during those decades and performing music was often a very lucrative occupation. Because of its very nature, musical performance often allowed musicians to work other jobs aside from performing, thereby allowing musicians to maximize their earning potential. One older Roma clarinetist in Vranje explained that he worked welding aluminum (as a *limar*) during the day but then performed in *kafana* orchestras in the evenings. He assured me that the combination of his earnings at the time might easily amount to over 35,000 dinars. By comparison, he told me, some factory directors at the time did not make more than 30,000 dinars despite the prestige of their position! “How, then, was a factory director any better than me,” this elderly musician rhetorically asked me during our interview, emphasizing that the widespread availability of work allowed even average (or marginalized) residents of the town to live well. This economic bounty also meant that musicians’ earnings during performances were often substantial. Because of widespread interest, restaurants, cafes, and hotels at the time steadily employed specific *kafana* ensembles to perform on weekends or on certain evenings in their establishments. This regular work for Romani musicians created a more stable economic platform for these professionals to support their families. Furthermore, older Romani musicians proudly boasted that many at the time were also registered with the “Union of Musicians”

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(*Udruženje Muzičara*) based in nearby Skopje¹². As union members, musicians had “worker’s documents” (*radne knjižice*) that gave them access to important benefits. The union was often the middle-man in finding gigs and negotiating steady contracts for these *kafana* musicians. In addition (and perhaps most importantly), musicians’ earnings were documented by the union and therefore allowed these musicians to earn pensions (*radni staž*) based on their lifelong earnings during performances! The institutionalization of musical performance in this way provided an even more stable context for musicians to make a living. Together with the favorable economic context, this formal appreciation of musical performance as a profession helped to elevate Romani musicians in Vranje to a more prestigious place in local society.

The cultural prestige of Romani musicians in this time period is evident in the way they are discussed by both Serbs and Roma in Vranje. Many stress that these professional entertainers even obtained middle-class status (*srednji stalež*) with their earnings. Such discussions also often commented on other aspects of the musicians’ appearance and comportment as evidence of their high standing. One Roma woman in Vranje exclaimed with pleasure upon seeing a certain famous, older *kafana* musician in a 30 year-old photograph I had recently obtained. “That man was quite the gentleman (*To je bio gospodin čovek!*),” she told me with great enthusiasm. She proceeded to tell me that she remembered as a child watching him descend through the mahala in the early evenings on his way to perform in one of the town’s famous restaurants. He was always impeccably dressed in a suit, complete with tie and cufflinks, and carrying his violin in a case under his arm he always looked the epitome of high class. His proud and calm demeanor was a trademark of the self-assured “culture” musicians of his day and represented the high status of his profession. Many other informants also emphasized the high degree of decorum Romani musicians cultivated at the time, telling me that their appearance, carriage, and the ways they approached potential patrons at these gigs were an important part of the highly cultured atmospheres at hotels and cafes in this period. Several older Serbs in town spoke with obvious affection about certain well-known *kafana* musicians they knew in their youth, indicating that these men were respectable gentlemen who developed personal relationships with many of their regular clients. These musicians are said to have known how to play exactly the right song in the right way for a given group of visitors. It is significant that both Roma and Serbs in Vranje draw attention to the personal one-on-one relationships that musicians and patrons often nurtured in this time period.

¹² Roma in Vranje later assured me that more recently a musician’s union was also organized and based in Vranje itself. Much like the older union in Skopje, though, it is no longer active, presumably as a result of the collapse of the former socialist system and government in the early 1990s.

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Many such stories emphasize that certain Serb patrons developed particular affections for a given Romani musician or orchestra and regularly sought out these musicians above others. One Roma informant in Vranje told the following story about his grandfather to paint a picture of these intimate and lucrative relationships:

I remember one night when I was a child a wealthy director of a local firm dropped by my grandfather's home. He was likely returning to town from the Hotel Pržar, and decided to stop in along the way, since our home is located along this main road from Pržar. I was already getting ready for bed, but we all heard a car pull over and park in the vicinity of our home. The man knocked on our front door and my grandmother let him into our home. He asked if my grandfather Zenka was home, and when my grandmother told him that he was he asked if she would call him in. When my grandfather entered the room, the director greeted him and asked if my grandfather wouldn't mind playing a few songs for him, "for my soul" he told him. My grandfather agreed, and while my grandmother started to make coffee for the man my grandfather asked me to go get his accordion. My grandfather quickly dressed in his good clothes. My grandmother served the man his coffee on a tray, things had to be *bonton*¹³ you know, while my grandfather took a seat in a chair at the kitchen table, facing the director like this. For the next 20 minutes, my grandfather played songs non-stop for the man. When he was satisfied, the director reached into his coat pocket and laid a series of bills onto the kitchen table in front of my grandfather. Thanking him, he stood up and wished us all a good evening before heading out the door and driving off. After he left, my grandfather took me on his knee to show me the money the director had left. I was young, so I didn't know, but my grandfather explained to me that this amounted to one month's average wages at the time! Imagine that! And this man had such an appreciation for the good music my grandfather played that he was not sorry to leave such a big tip for this short visit! That's how things were in those days.

Considering the social and economic barriers that often separated the Romani minority from majority Serb society, the familiarity that many of Vranje's residents shared with Romani musicians is a telling sign of the value that adhered to good musicians. Many Serbs easily and proudly talk about "legendary" Romani musicians in the *kafana* genre, peppering their discussions with anecdotes and stories from the lives of musicians such as Kurta

¹³ *Bonton* here refers to established, Western, and cultured etiquette used for serving meals and refreshments. There is an element of nostalgia here for "older times" and knowledge about these formal rituals that structured social interactions at the time. In addition, this facet is important for emphasizing the high degree of respect the man's family was extending to this wealthy patron.

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Ajredinović¹⁴, Jaško Jašarević¹⁵, and others. These stories indicate a high degree of mutual respect between Romani musicians and Serb clients that was maintained through the constant exchange and interaction that characterized social life in Vranje at the time.

Brass musicians also speak of the personal prestige and respect they enjoyed in the town during the peak years of the former Yugoslavia. With the growing prestige of the Guča Festival¹⁶, musicians like the famous Bakija Bakić from Vranje added new layers to the reputation of Romani brass performers as excellent musicians. Bakija's orchestra in particular was a source of pride for Vranje residents, and many informants enjoyed telling me that they had made certain that this specific band performed for their wedding. Because their services were central to local ritual celebrations, brass musicians were highly valued and well-rewarded for their services. One older band leader from Vranje explained to me that patrons in those days were exceptionally generous with their money. Each and every song and dance tune performed was rewarded with an appropriate cash tip, and this older musician remembers seeing patrons throw out wads of bills without so much as a glance at the amount being given to the musicians! In those days, he assured me, everyone worked and people could afford to be magnanimous to entertainers. In addition, he added, people were always "good hosts" (*dobri domaćini*), making certain that musicians were served food and drink throughout the day as well. Older Serb informants confirm this picture of generous and familiar relationships, talking about the affection with which they reserved hefty tips for the moment their favorite brass musician would play a song or dance that held a special place in the patron's heart. One such informant from Vranje remembers the pure pleasure he would feel when musicians like Bakija struck up the dance tune *Pembe, pembe* on his account. He never failed to reward the lead musician with a *crvendaća*¹⁷ bill for this song; he tells of having had great *merak*¹⁸ to gift

¹⁴ A favorite clarinet player from *Gornja Čaršija* in Vranje, many locals relish telling visitors that Boki Milošević, perhaps Serbia's most famous clarinet player, spent his early career learning from Kurta in Vranje!

¹⁵ This violinist from *Gornja Čaršija* was well known not only for performing in local venues and in theatrical productions of Bora Stanković's works, but also as a professor of violin and trumpet in Vranje's music school.

¹⁶ The Guča Brass Festival is a competition for brass band music in Serbia that was founded in 1960. Within 3 years Roma brass bands from Vranje began competing at this festival, and in the decades since this competition has become an important source of fame and prestige for Romani brass musicians in Serbia. Since the late 1990s, the festival has expanded greatly in scope as a result of greater state investment and marketing pitched at audiences across Western Europe and the North America. The growing international fame of brass music from Serbia (particularly that of Romani musicians) is closely linked to the commercialization of this festival over the course of the past two decades.

¹⁷ A unit of Yugoslav currency.

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money to musicians during such emotionally exciting moments in dance events. Stories about personal relationships between Serbs and Romani musicians also entail another important dimension, however. Repeatedly, Roma would emphasize that their close connections to Serbs were also the result of their shared identity as “old settlers” in Vranje¹⁹. Many of the Serbs that most appreciated brass and brass musicians were from older families in Vranje, Roma claimed, and as such better understood and valued this musical tradition. Musicians argued that these *stari Vranjanci*²⁰ had more respect and appreciated the finer nuances of the mutual relationships between entertainers and their patrons. These people “didn’t look at us as mere Gypsies”, as one older brass musician in Vranje told me. In those times “under Tito”, he told me, people usually didn’t think along those lines and any sign of discrimination was swiftly punished by authorities. These informants argue that the intimate relationships developed by fellow “old settler” Roma and Serbs in Vranje thus softened the boundaries that informally separated more marginalized Roma from the Serb community in town. The unique combination of wealth, political stability, and shared “Vranje identity” during the former Yugoslavia helped to create a prestigious and lucrative niche for the skills of professional Romani musicians.

¹⁸ *Merak* (Arabic, Turkish *merak*) is frequently used in Vranje to describe „strong desire“ or „pleasure“ (Zlatanović 1998). For example, locals use the term *meraklija* to describe someone that enjoys good food, drink, and having a good time; it is particularly often used to describe a person with a special love of music and dance, and who doesn’t regret spending large amounts of money to enjoy themselves in this manner.

¹⁹ Roma in Vranje proudly assert that their communities are the oldest continual inhabitants of the town, arguing that they have maintained a continuous presence since Ottoman times. Many of the city’s current Serb population, on the other hand, are more recent immigrants from outlying rural regions, and as such are regarded in a somewhat pejorative fashion by the town’s Roma. For more information, see Zlatanović (2008).

²⁰ Literally “old Vranje residents”, this term is used in Vranje to indicate families of Serbs and Roma that are perceived to have deeper roots in the town. This is a problematic construct, though, as most current Serb residents (and even many Roma families) trace ancestry from families that only moved to Vranje within the past century. Many Serbs trace ancestry from rural settlements in the Pomoravlje, Pčinja, or Poljanica regions; other residents that identify as Serbs or Bulgarians arrived from the Bosilegrad and Vlasina regions, and still others who claim mostly Serb ancestry have come from eastern Kosovo and northern Macedonia. Moreover, the construct of “old settler” has very specific cultural and political dimensions in today’s Vranje. Many locals speak very negatively of “immigrants” from mountainous eastern regions, pejoratively calling them *Šopovi*. Lack of respectable culture and a backward demeanor are the heaviest charges against such „new arrivals“, and the binary opposition of „us vs. them“ is counterbalanced by notions of „higher culture“ claimed by families that have lived longer in the urban context of Vranje. For more information, see Zlatanović (2008).

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In this context, Romani musicians in the Vranje area were able to live well simply from the high demand for their services in the region. Many musicians claim to have never felt pressure to travel further abroad to perform. For brass musicians in particular, this kind of working migration was relatively haphazard at the time. The specificities of local celebrations that traditionally engaged brass musicians were a distinctly regional cultural phenomenon, and the demand for this type of music was mostly confined to southern Serbia. Although brass musicians did at times travel for work, the vast majority of their trips were confined to specific communities in and around Leskovac, Niš, Grdelica, Vranje, Bujanovac, and even in northern Macedonia. For example, Roma in Vranjska Banja remember that the local ensemble of Ekrem Sajdić, *Zlatni Prsti*, was regularly hired in its heyday for Romani weddings in Leskovac. For other orchestras, the Brass Festival in Guča and the resulting attention from Yugoslav mass media propelled their specific brass ensembles into the broader limelight. As a result of this growing fame, the orchestras of musicians like Bakija Bakić were sometimes requested to perform at festivals, concerts, and for political events throughout the former Yugoslavia. One of Bakija's descendants even proudly remembers that this orchestra accompanied the Yugoslav national soccer team to a championship game in Spain in the 1980s! However, informant's discussions of the conditions for brass musicians in this time period indicate that these sporadic travels were likely not an economic priority for these musicians. Moreover, many of my participants indicated that there simply was not a wider demand for this brass genre farther abroad; despite the gradual expansion of the Guča Brass Festival, this music was still considered "foreign" (*strano*) for much of the population to the north of southeastern Serbia, and therefore musicians had few hopes of contracting gigs in these regions. Instead, it was the unique local culture of elaborate public celebrations that provided these brass musicians with a secure base for earning money and developing their professional reputations as entertainers.

Unlike their colleagues, Romani musicians performing in the *kafana* genre were much more mobile in the former Yugoslavia. Although there was no dearth of work for them in the diverse hospitality venues located in Vranje, many of these musicians relate that significant portions of their professional careers were spent performing throughout the former Yugoslavia. One Romani accordionist from Vranjska Banja reminisced that local Romani performers of this *kafana* genre "were famous throughout the nation, *od Kumanova do Triglava!*" Many of these musicians explain that their repertoires were very cosmopolitan, and that the quality of their music made them very popular in high-class establishments throughout the nation. Some were hired for their specific knowledge of Vranje's traditional musical repertoire, traveling with theater groups performing plays based in "Old Vranje" to provide the

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appropriate musical accompaniment for these productions. *Kafana* musicians were also in demand for repertoires that were of more generic appeal to audiences in cultural contexts far from Vranje. Many musicians from Vranjska Banja, for example, cherish stories about performing in hotels along the Adriatic coastline in Croatia or in Slovenia. They emphasized the prestige that accrued to their “worldly” repertoire of songs. One evening while discussing these non-local performance venues with a group of musicians in Vranjska Banja, one of their crew evoked peals of laughter from the others by recalling how a musician in their cohort once sarcastically suggested that they play the song *More zadade se crni oblak* from the Vranje area while in a hotel in Slovenia! Later in the same conversation I asked if the band ever received requests to perform the songs made popular by Esmā Redžepova²¹. Another of the band members disdainfully dismissed the idea, telling me that such music was considered low-grade and too “local” for the audiences with which they customarily worked. Indeed, many such informants emphasized the prestigious “cosmopolitan” status of *kafana* music by favorably comparing it with the *svadbarska* wedding repertoire of local brass musicians. These brass bands were a mainly local phenomenon at the time, they emphasized, catering to local “peasants” on a less formal gig-by-gig basis. Accordingly, local brass musicians had a less favorable standing than the more versatile and widely in-demand *kafana* musicians. Although neither *kafana* nor brass musicians at the time complained of insufficient work in the local context, members of the former category stress that their working travels were in fact the result of high demand for their superior, diverse musical talents further abroad in Yugoslavia. The local discourse about these “musical migrations”, therefore, is less concerned with the importance of these travels for meeting the financial needs of these Romani musicians. Instead, it equates the occupational mobility of *kafana* musicians at the time with significant prestige and higher “culture” that makes claims to a privileged status in the social fabric of the former Yugoslavia. In addition to providing economic resources for these musicians to lead more prosperous lives, these travels were an important part of the construction of professional prestige for Vranje’s Romani musicians in the Socialist period. With the collapse of this socioeconomic system, however,

²¹ Esmā Redžepova is a Romani singer who rose to fame in the 1960s in the former Yugoslavia. She is often credited to be one of the first Romani entertainers to popularize Romani musical culture for non-Roma audiences (Silverman 2003). Many of her songs are arrangements based on „traditional“ repertoires of songs and melodies that were common to Roma communities throughout Macedonia, Kosovo, and southern Serbia. For many Roma today, she remains a musical icon and ambassador for Romani culture to the wider world. However, many younger Roma in Vranje often commented that her music was too „old-fashioned“ to be of much interest for their current generation; indeed, many could not name (much less sing or hum) many of the songs made famous by Esmā.

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Vranje's musicians would find themselves confronted with new challenges to maintain earnings and reputation in the local context.

Vranje Post-1990s: Conflict and Collapse

The wars that broke apart Yugoslavia in the 1990s set in motion far-reaching political, economic, and social processes that destroyed the context in which Vranje's Romani musicians had developed a lucrative professional niche. Although the wars in Bosnia and Croatia were physically distant from Vranje, the economic hardships caused by military spending, rampant inflation, and international sanctions began to take their toll on Vranje's population. After the beginning of armed conflicts in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the widespread destruction of local infrastructure exacerbated the decline of the regional economy in southeastern Serbia. Moreover, the removal of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000 officially ended Socialist rule in what remained of the former Yugoslavia. As the political opposition came to power in Serbia, new political and economic policies were put into effect in accordance with the "pro-democratic" and "pro-Western" re-orientation in the nation's leadership. This political climate has had wide-ranging ramifications for Vranje's regional economy, and resulting local unemployment and poverty has in turn shattered the cultural foundations of Vranje's social and musical life.

Economic Upheaval and the Rise of Nationalism

Throughout the 1990s Vranje's voting populace strongly supported the ruling Socialist party. As a bastion of support for the Socialists, Vranje also enjoyed a fairly privileged status in Serbia under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević. Its economic and political needs were relatively well met even during the economic hardships of the early 1990s. Many of the industrial giants and factories of Vranje were led by strongly pro-Socialist directors that cultivated important political connections in order to obtain needed resources and capital for these firms. Politics and local economy were strongly linked at the time, and the working populace was cajoled (and at times, even coerced) into loyalty to the Socialist party because of its role in maintaining the large firms that employed the vast majority of Vranje's residents. Even today, many of Vranje's residents maintain nothing but praise for the Milošević government and its support of Vranje's local economy. They note that work was still abundant, and that workers still received their full pay on a timely basis; one woman remembers that she even continued to receive her husband's paychecks during the NATO bombing, even though her husband was on the battlefield in

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Kosovo! In addition, locals point out that the standard of living remained reasonable despite the turmoil in the nation throughout the 1990s. Prices for basic food items and other living necessities were kept at reasonable levels, so that family incomes were still strong enough to provide for the essentials of people's everyday lives. Although the political, economic, and military turbulence of this decade were not the easy times of Tito's Yugoslavia, Vranje in the 1990s continued to fare significantly better than other regions of Serbia because of strong support of the ruling Socialist party.

With the toppling of Milošević's regime in October of 2000, however, the new political and economic strategies of resulting governments have inalterably affected the state of Vranje's economy. The democratic transition has also entailed a complete overhaul of the economic program of Serbia's economy, throwing open the door for increased foreign investment and rapid privatization of the economy. As Vranje's industrial firms fell into the hands of *privatnici* (private ownership), levels of employment were drastically slashed as these firms were overhauled. Many workers were laid off after being proclaimed *tehnološki višak*²² in the larger scheme of firm productivity. The cost-effective motto of new capitalist investors has radically altered the levels of employment in this town, where locals claim that the majority of the working populace was entirely reliant on these numerous factory jobs. Indeed, large numbers of people were left unemployed due to these sweeping overhauls; firms that once employed over 10,000 people were cut down to barely 2,000 workers. Moreover, many such firms did not long survive the privatization process. The *KOŠTANA* shoe factory, for example, was bought by an Italian investor shortly after the Kosovo conflict. Within a few years, however, the company collapsed and the investor moved on, leaving the firm's 4,000 plus workers unemployed. Furthermore, the financial state of the company was so poor at the time that many workers were still owed months of back pay. For years, they pressured the local government to settle these debts to no avail. In 2009, a certain portion of the former employees of the firm received a small, symbolic percentage of the income they were owed. At the same time, the government representatives announced that the company was now officially bankrupt and indicated that there would be no more money disbursed to former employees. Attempts to integrate Serbia's economy into flows of transnational capitalism through privatization and foreign investment have thus resulted in the loss of worker security and severely reduced employment opportunities in Vranje.

The working conditions of those who have remained employed in the newly privatized economy of Vranje are often much more difficult than in the former Yugoslavia. With the stark reduction in job positions under the umbrella of

²² Literally translating to "technical excess", this term liberally peppers the stories of many in Vranje who were laid off of jobs in these large industrial firms.

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large local industrial firms, competition to retain or obtain positions in remaining factories is stiff. Often, personal or political connections are vital for residents to access jobs in industry. Massive unemployment has also rendered the workforce in Vranje much less powerful in relation to employers and firm owners. The value and bargaining power of labor has been completely undermined by these changes, as employers can easily threaten workers with replacement by new laborers desperately in need of work. As a result, locals complain that they are subjected to low wages, irregular pay, and even physical or sexual harassment while being largely unable to combat the growing power of capital interests in the town's privatized economy. Class rifts in the town have widened as a relatively small percentage of the local population successfully utilize this economic and political transition to obtain expanded political and financial resources. Subsequently, the interests of private entrepreneurs and local political cadres continue to converge as government gives increasing free reign to private enterprise in return for political support. On the other hand, the vast majority of Vranje's workforce is faced with drastically reduced employment opportunities, rising levels of exploitation, and less recourse to protection from legal and governing bodies in the region.

As the ramifications of this rapid privatization continue to manifest themselves in Vranje, expanding levels of unemployment are coupled with drastic changes in the standard of living. Prices for basic necessities such as food, drink, and clothing have continued to rise even as incomes are plummeting. Locals often complain that meat products and clothing, for example, often cost just as much in Vranje today as they do in Belgrade! At the same time, average monthly wages in Vranje are currently estimated at a mere 100 EU, easily 3 to 4 times smaller than earnings in Belgrade. These meager incomes are often barely enough to support even basic lifestyles for Vranje locals, especially when many families are only supported by a single working adult. The desperation resulting from growing *nemaština*²³ in Vranje, locals argue, has driven workers to compete ever more for smaller, more limited economic niches. Locals claim that the growing desperation is leading people to engage in types of work never before considered viable, much less desirable. The frequency of *šverc*, the re-sale of goods purchased in other regional markets or in the weaker economies of neighboring countries, has skyrocketed in Vranje. Apparel, jewelry, toiletries, household goods, cigarettes, and even produce are bought and sold by growing numbers of Vranje residents in order to help make ends meet. In addition, more and more people must seek jobs in the service industry, acting as waiters in cafes or cashiers in grocery stores for

²³ *Nemaština* is the Serb term used by locals to describe the „the state of lack” in a way that encompasses today's lack of employment, low incomes, and the overall desperation of society in Vranje.

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relatively low wages. Unfortunately, informants in Vranje indicate that the situation is hardest for Vranje's youth as they struggle to find employment despite the shrinking and ever more competitive local economy. Locals complain that many families are forced to live off of the monthly pensions brought in by parents and grandparents who worked "while times were still good". Limited employment opportunities, poor wages, and a lack of job security increasingly deprive Vranje's youth of the opportunity to obtain experience as workers. For most, this is one of the most ominous prospects for the future of Vranje's economy in coming decades as the crisis continues to deepen.

The economic crisis in Vranje is also closely intertwined with other social and cultural changes that developed as a result of the civil wars of the 1990s. As the former Yugoslavia broke into new nation-states, nationalism became a powerful tool in re-shaping popular support for new boundaries and new political regimes (Bougarel 2007; Duijzings 2001; Hammel 2000; Hayden 1996; Hayden 2000). In the midst of the wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and later in Kosovo, Vranje's population grappled with the different discourses on identity that were part of the nationalist projects sweeping the region after the fall of "Brotherhood and Unity"²⁴. Now situated in a border region of a territorially redefined Serbia, debates in Vranje about national identity and belonging were often reactionary, swinging away from what is often considered the "falseness" of multi-ethnic solidarity of the former Yugoslavia. When armed conflicts with Albanian separatists began in Kosovo, Bujanovac, and Preševo near Vranje, ethnic tensions increased substantially between various groups in the region. Increasing mistrust, fear, and social distance have begun to characterize relationships between different communities around Vranje. This situation has also affected Roma and Serb relationships in the area. Some informants in Vranje tell that Roma were harassed by fellow Serb soldiers while serving on the frontlines in Kosovo; one in particular told me that he had heard stories of soldiers boasting that Roma were next on the list once the Albanian "problem"

²⁴ Brotherhood and Unity was one of the most famous slogans of Socialist Yugoslavia. This expression indicated that the formation of Yugoslavia under Tito had united various ethnic and religious groups into a new common national identity. It intended to show that these groups had successfully learned to depoliticize their ethnic differences so that they might work toward the common goal of building a new, better society. There is strong debate (in both academic and lay circles) in the post-Socialist climate as to whether this slogan truly reflected the reality of this question in Yugoslavia; on the contrary, critics of this ideology often argue that it was the threat of force and political ostracization that enforced this "façade" even as ethnic and religious differences (and tensions) were never really undone by the Socialist project.

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had been settled! Roma youth in Vranje chose to move their *korzo*²⁵ from the city's main park to the center of the *Gornja Čaršija* mahala in the aftermath of a few brawls between Serb and Roma teens in the early 1990s. Other Roma indicate that small groups of self-proclaimed "skinheads" have randomly attacked lone Roma youths returning to their communities in the evening hours. Stories like these circulated widely in the Roma communities during the turmoil of this decade, and many argue that Roma began to massively convert to Orthodox Christianity in an attempt to avoid being targeted by growing Serb nationalism. Until the 1980s most Roma in the region considered themselves to be Muslims by tradition if not through formal religious practice. Names, burial customs, folk attire, and various other elements of Romani culture are associated with Ottoman Muslim traditions. Since many Serbs perceived diverse Muslim populations to be "enemies" after the breakup of Yugoslavia, Roma in Vranje have also become concerned about potential fallout in interactions with their predominantly Serb neighbors. Massive conversion to Orthodox and Protestant Christian churches²⁶, the use of more "neutral" (Serbian or Western) first names²⁷, and the vocal rejection of "Turkish" or

²⁵ *Korzo* in Vranje refers to the once popular practice of "strolling and mingling" on city streets in the evenings by both local youth. Locals tell that Serbs and Roma had separate *korzo* gatherings- the Serbs would gather in the city center, while the Roma confined themselves to the city park and later the main Romani mahala. While this formal practice has slowly dwindled in the Serb community (which increasingly chooses to frequent cafes instead), it remains one of the main social activities of Roma teens in Vranje. Many youths commented that this is partially because it is one of the only viable options available to Roma- economic and informal social ("ethnic") restraints almost completely exclude Roma from patronizing public cafes in the city center.

²⁶ In Vranje, a large number of Roma have joined Protestant Christian churches as the result of intensive missionary activity in the region. Most of these converts are members of the Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostalist, and Jehovah's Witness churches. Younger Roma and women form the bulk of worshippers in these churches, while older community members look somewhat negatively on these new faiths and consider this to be a betrayal of true Romani cultural identity and its older Muslim heritage. There are even cases of families that are divided between new converts and others who remain undefined or defiantly Muslim. In addition, Roma who belong to one denomination are often dismissive of those in other churches- there is evidence that new internal tensions in the community are partially the result of rising inter-confessional intolerance. Interestingly, the Adventist Church in Vranje now has 2 parishes, one considered the "Serb" congregation in the lower portion of the city and a newer "Romani" congregation in the upper neighborhoods of the town. Although church members do mingle at certain joint services and sermons, this divide along "ethnic" lines seems to be fairly strong if unofficial.

²⁷ Older Roma often have Muslim names such as Durak, Asan, Neviza, Nedžipa, Ekrem, Mamut, etc. The middle-aged Roma in the region are more likely to have Serbian-type names such as Miroslav, Ninoslava, Stanislav, Miodrag, Anica, etc. Many of the younger generation, though, sport names like Denis, Robert, Žoržeta, Džulija, Marijus, Fabijan, Sara, etc.

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“Muslim” elements in Romani culture may indicate strategic masking of these elements in order to avoid harassment from radical elements of local Serb society²⁸.

Vranje’s Roma also argue that these nationalist sentiments have increased discrimination against their community at the hands of the Serb majority. Tensions are exacerbated by deteriorating economic conditions in the region, and Roma and Serbs increasingly find themselves competing for ever more scarce resources. Roma in Vranje complain that they were among the first to be laid off as local firms began to spiral into collapse. Moreover, other niches that were once dominated by Roma have become interesting alternatives for Serbs as work becomes scarce. Whereas “no self-respecting Serb would ever have considered selling socks on the street”, one Serb woman indicated, today there are growing numbers of Serb peddlers setting up stalls next to those of Roma on market days. While Roma have no formal claim to monopolizing this line of work, many are afraid that Serbs are more likely to buy from “fellow Serbs” than Roma because of a purported shared “national”²⁹ identity. One Roma man complained that other Serbs benefit from their ethnic identity to obtain now-coveted positions as garbage men and street cleaners for Vranje’s “Streets and Sanitation” (*KOMRAD*); whereas this work used to be completely in Roma hands, this informant claims that nowadays Serb applicants are often given preferential access over Roma candidates. In general, Roma argue that they are the first to lose job positions when venues are closing and complain that they are the also last to be offered positions in new economic venues. Even government disbursement of unemployment and social welfare benefits is held to be more consistently shirked or denied when Roma are concerned. Local Serbs (especially municipal officials) often deny that discrimination is on the rise, pointing to various programs and services that work on facilitating the integration of Roma into mainstream society. However, many Roma argue that the current political climate in Vranje in fact cultivates an unofficial policy of

²⁸ For additional information on the complexities of Romani identity in Vranje, see Zlatanović (2006) and (2008). For the construction and masking of Romani identities in Kosovo and Macedonia in the wake of the civil wars, see also Dujzings (1997) and (2001).

²⁹ Interestingly, the terms “ethnic/ethnicity” (*etnički identitet*) are rarely used in Vranje. Instead, „nationality“ (*nacionalnost*) is the concept actively used to to formally distinguish different linguistic/confessional groups from one another, i.e., *Romske nacionalnosti*, *Srpske nacionalnosti*, etc. This is distinct from the concept of *državljanstvo*, or citizenship, with which people refer to one’s belonging to the geopolitical framework of a specific nation. Several Roma laughingly told me that they thoroughly enjoyed confusing Serbs by telling them that they were also „Srbi” (Serbs) by virtue of having Serbian passports; Serbs often had a hard time processing the meaning of these assertions, regularly rebutting that the person couldn’t be a “Serb” when he was “obviously Rom” or a “Gypsy” (*Ciganin*). These stories point to the contradictory and complex nature of notions of “national” and “ethnic” identities, particularly in the ever-changing political context of the Balkans.

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neglect and bias against members of their community. Finding themselves marginalized anew in the wake of new definitions of the “nation” in Vranje, Roma must struggle with the combined pressures of economic crisis and polarizing ethnic relations in the region. Current patterns of economic competition and political manipulation are linked in popular discourse to “ethnic tensions” as civil society is increasingly affected by this state of crisis. As such, ethnicity increasingly becomes a flash point as members of Serb and Roma society jostle past one another in attempts to maintain their livelihoods in Vranje.

Music and Musicians in Crisis

The growing socioeconomic crisis in Vranje has also significantly undermined the foundations of Romani musical performance in the region. As poverty rises, demand for musicians is on the wane as locals increasingly cannot afford celebrations or musical entertainment. At the same time, Romani monopoly of the musical domain is also being undercut by new discourses about identity and ethnic inter-relationships. As local Serbs seek new means of making a living, newly-formed Serb orchestras provide growing competition for specific Romani musical ensembles. The economic and political turmoil of the past two decades are rapidly changing the social relationships and cultural values that provided the marginalized Romani community with a respected professional niche in local society. At the same time, these conditions are spurring new forms of occupational migrations as Romani entertainers seek new sources of income and prestige further abroad.

Since the 1990s, many of Vranje’s famous entertainment establishments were irrevocably hurt by the economic collapse in the region. *Kafanas* and restaurants dwindled in number, and the large crowds enjoying evenings of dining and dancing disappeared amidst increasing levels poverty and social apathy. Vranje’s famous *Kafana Evropa* is a prime example of this trend; this *kafana* has not been operating for some years according to locals, and in 2009 it was bought by an entrepreneur and is currently being converted into a new supermarket. Musical evenings in the garden of the *Hotel Vranje* have also ended. The grand-nephew of Bakija Bakić indicates that he attempted to revitalize his orchestra’s tradition of performing there on Monday evenings some years back, but because of lack of interest they were forced to abandon the idea. As the cultural institution of the *kafana* is fading, so is the demand for the *kafana* musical ensemble once so popular in Vranje. In fact, Roma informants indicate that this genre has been completely removed from public entertainment venues over the past 20 years. Although this is partially due to the widespread closing of these establishments and a growing lack of interest

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among locals, many musicians claim that ethnic competition has also contributed to their gradual loss of this entertainment niche. Recently, newer pop and folk-type ensembles are being founded by young Serbs in the town. Playing mostly on electronic instruments like synthesizers, these bands have begun to edge Romani ensembles out of the café niche in the region. Many musicians readily attribute this to outright discrimination on the part of proprietors. “*Ciganske prsti su čudo*”³⁰, one Roma man in Vranje assured me, indicating that Roma had a genetic predisposition to playing music that could not be topped by any other group. Despite the long Romani tradition of superb musical performance, informants claim, young Serb bands of barely mediocre quality are regularly engaged these days in place of Romani musicians. One older clarinetist in Vranje explained that his band was fired several years ago from a restaurant in which they had performed regularly for over a decade. He was livid when the new proprietor roughly exclaimed “You Gypsies have eaten enough bread here” while telling him that he had hired another, non-Romani orchestra to take their place. As Vranje’s economic and political climate changes in the wake of the recent crisis, the institution of the Romani *kafana* ensemble is increasingly undesirable in Vranje’s impoverished society. Without the support of formal institutions like the Musician’s Union of the past, the prestige and economic viability of this musical ensemble has suffered in the region. Although relics of this type of orchestra continue to perform on demand for individual family banquets and smaller celebrations like village *slavas*³¹, the context that supported this genre as a diverse, mobile, and lucrative entertainment niche has effectively collapsed.

As a result, many young Roma in Vranje are now turning with increasing interest to other genres and instruments in pursuing their musical careers. The violin and bass cello are rarely played anymore in Vranje as a result of waning interest in the *kafana* ensemble. Clarinet, saxophone, and tarabuka remain popular because they are still used in smaller ensembles that play for family celebrations in the region, but also because they are sought after for ensembles

³⁰ Literally, “Gypsy fingers are unique”!

³¹ Romani musicians that still play the instruments that make up the *kafana* ensemble often seek work on a “gig by gig” basis these days. They keep close tabs on the Orthodox church calendar, strolling through settlements in the region on specific holidays that are celebrated jointly by the community in the hopes of being invited in to entertain guests at family homes. Such small, impromptu groups have varying luck in such endeavors, and often walk and play for hours without making enough to even cover the expenses of travel! For example, a 5 person ensemble I spoke with on one day had only received some 80 dinars per person as result of 8 hours of work- barely enough to buy a *pljeskavica* burger at the end of the day! Extreme local poverty makes it very difficult for these musicians to make a living as people are reluctant to admit them into their homes during celebrations because they are unable to pay them for their services. Informants indicate that this situation is very different from the state of affairs several decades ago.

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of a newer Roma-specific musical ensemble that frequently plays at Romani weddings³². It is brass instruments, however, that are the most popular presently among Romani musicians in the region. Unlike the *kafana* ensembles, brass bands remain in demand in Vranje for the large family celebrations traditional to local culture. Furthermore, this genre still remains mostly in the hands of Romani musicians in the region. Although there are a few Serb individuals known to play instruments in the brass genre, for the most part locals indicate that there are no organized efforts at creating all-Serb brass bands. One Roma informant cynically assured me that this would only last until some innovative Serbs come up with this idea; in the event that this barrier is broken, he asserted, Romani brass bands would also be subject to exclusion and discrimination no matter how mediocre the skills of the new Serb orchestra. For the moment, however, it seems that brass remains an entertainment niche with enough local demand to maintain a feasible market for professional Romani musicians in the region. The increasing popularity of brass music as a result of the films of Emir Kusturica, the Guča Brass Festival, and the Boban Marković orchestra also adds to growing interest in this genre, and young Roma in the Vranje area are particularly keen to perform in brass ensembles.

Despite the continued demand for this genre, however, Romani brass musicians are also struggling with the changing conditions in Vranje. Local poverty means that brass bands have increasing difficulty making ends meet from gigs they play in the region. Patrons are ever more strapped for cash because of meager and insecure earnings. A full brass ensemble of 10 to 14 musicians of necessity represents a great expense for the host because the *pogodba*, or agreed-upon fee, must be sufficient to accommodate each individual musician. As such, the minimum fee in such situations cannot be less than 100 EU to grant each musician at least 10 euros for the performance. Brass musicians indicate that this is a relatively low price compared to earlier earnings, and the amount barely makes performances economically feasible considering the hours of work that are usually involved. However, they also

³² This genre, usually referred to as *talava* or *ozvučena muzika*, can also be very lucrative for Romani musicians. It is increasingly popular as entertainment during the second day of Roma wedding festivities in the wider Vranje region, but is also widely in demand among Roma in Macedonia, Kosovo, Bujanovac, and in the diasporas of these regions in northern Serbia and in Western Europe. These *gastarbeitsers* from abroad in particular pay large sums for these bands, and thus good ensembles may make substantial earnings from their skills. Young Roma men in Vranje tell me that the best bands often charge some 5 to 10,000 EU to perform in the Romani diaspora!! This high price is part of the increasing popularity among Roma youth of this more „modern“ musical genre; some Roma, however, are critical of the overtly Arabic/Middle Eastern influences on the music and the „kitschy“ lyrics of many of the songs, saying that this is an unfortunate departure from higher-quality, „traditional“ Romani music.

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acknowledge that most of their local patrons are in a financial bind as well and cannot afford to give more; „*I oni si imav muke*³³“ one brass band leader told me with resignation. Musicians also comment that tips have dried up at such celebrations because of the widespread poverty gripping the region. The initial *pogodba* is often the only source of money at performances nowadays as fewer and fewer guests are willing to gift money to musicians. The moral overtones of the cultural obligation to tip musicians during events have become a source of strife because of current economic conditions, and tension increasingly marks relationships between celebrants and musicians as a result. Brass performers complain that today's guests lack the „culture“ cultivated by celebrants in previous decades. Today, patrons often demand longer lists of songs and tunes from musicians for little or no tip; one musician exclaimed that celebrants often expected to be personally entertained for more than a half hour in return for a mere 100 DIN tip³⁴! Another informant indicated that certain guests truly attempt to „squeeze“ the maximum amount of entertainment out of musicians for a single tip. Musicians complain that patrons are also more unseemly in the ways they approach musicians. In addition to undervaluing their efforts through meager tips, some individuals will loudly complain about the quality of the music in attempts to avoid giving tips after the songs have been played! Sometimes celebrants under the influence will even become physical with musicians, either by pulling them away from another guest in mid-song or while disputing the quality of the musicians' playing. As the economic and social rules that once governed these celebrations are dissolved by the current crisis, Romani brass musicians are losing both the incomes and the prestige that once adhered to their presence as skilled professional performers.

The social and cultural foundations upon which the brass band niche depends are also weakening in the area. Many Vranje Serbs find it impossible to maintain the lavish scale and form of „traditional“ celebrations. Three-day wedding ceremonies are rare these days, and brass bands are often only called for the first half of what has become a one-day event. Brass orchestras accompany the ritual dancing and wedding processions in the mornings, but once the festivities have moved to the banquet hall in the evening they are replaced by new „electronic“ Serb bands that play pop and „turbofolk“ songs. Many in Vranje claim that it is the young generation that increasingly desires these „more modern“ one-day or „evening“ weddings (*noćne svadbe*). Elders who prefer the sounds of brass find themselves giving way to these new cultural trends and to the wishes of the marrying couple. Although most in Vranje still maintain that brass is a necessary and desirable musical genre for

³³ Literally „they, too, are suffering“.

³⁴ Roughly 1 euro.

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celebrations to be truly successful, other young locals consider brass music and the accompanying wedding rituals to be „stupid” or “old-fashioned”. Commentary sometimes depicted these ensembles as obnoxiously loud, or drew attention to the “dirty” practice brass musicians have of periodically emptying the spit valves of their instruments while playing. These informants would also often disparage the traditions of interacting with brass musicians at events, claiming that these “Gypsy” entertainers are only looking to make quick money through tips during these events. Some informants argued that these Romani entertainers “insist” too much on obtaining tips by playing into the face of specific celebrants, thereby drawing uncomfortable public attention to the fact that he has not or is incapable of producing cash. The emphasis on the “Gypsy” status and “attitude” of brass musicians underlines the complex intersection of processes of economic crisis, social disintegration, and the politicization of identity that characterizes contemporary life in Vranje. Economic hardship, therefore, contributes to rising social tensions that serve to weaken the entire sociocultural system that supports the patronage of Romani brass musicians in the region.

Traveling Brass: New Strategies in Uncertain Times

Even as the economic and social value of brass bands in Vranje is jeopardized by the crises of the past 20 years, other cultural processes are opening new occupational horizons for Romani brass professionals further abroad. Where the *kafana* musicians of Vranje have completely lost these performance niches, Vranje’s cadre of brass entertainers now increasingly seeks non-local spaces and audiences in order to augment their unstable earnings. The popularity of Romani brass music in other republics of the former Yugoslavia is a phenomenon that owes much to the widespread acclaim of Emir Kusturica’s films since the 1990s; many of the soundtracks of these films were partially or completely made up of brass compositions. The subsequent growth in popularity of the brass ensembles of Goran Bregović and Boban Marković as a result of these films has further bolstered the demand for brass in regions of the Balkans where this musical genre had never before been prominent. Finally, Serbia’s active expansion and marketing of the Guča Brass Festival has also capitalized on the growing “Western”³⁵ craze for Balkan and Romani brass music. The combined effect of these factors has increased the demand for “authentic” Romani brass from southern Serbia, and many of Vranje’s brass ensembles attempt to use this rapidly expanding notoriety to secure gigs and increase earnings outside of the impoverished Vranje region.

³⁵ In Serbia and in Vranje, this term is usually used to refer to Western Europe and North America and almost never includes other countries in Eastern Europe or the Balkans.

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In practice, Vranje's traveling brass ensembles predominantly make short trips to perform in towns in northern Serbia, Bosnia, and even Slovenia³⁶. The most common destinations are the capital city of Serbia, Belgrade, as well as larger towns in the Vojvodina region such as Novi Sad and Subotica. More enterprising bands have been able to make arrangements and find work performing in towns in Bosnia such as Banja Luka, or in cafes, restaurants, and hotels in Slovenia. Most often bands make day-trips or spend weekends in these places, but it is also possible for bands to make longer arrangements of weeks and (rarely) months if there is steady work to be found. Many times these ensembles are made up of unattached musicians pulled together ad-hoc by a single individual that has secured a traveling gig; in other cases, more permanent ensembles are formed when an entrepreneurial individual decides to create an orchestra for the purposes of performing „abroad“. Many bands comprise a father-son pair that have recruited others into their team, or else are made up entirely of young brass musicians that have not yet been brought into larger standing orchestras in Vranje. Musicians indicate that these traveling brass ensembles may use two distinct strategies to secure performances outside of Vranje. On the one hand, these bands make short trips to these northern towns in order to perform for pre-arranged gigs. In some cases, proprietors of halls and restaurants act as middle-men by arranging for these bands to play at weddings and other celebrations that have booked the establishments in question. Some of these ensembles, though, have also begun to hire managers to market the group, secure gigs, and negotiate deals with potential patrons. Interestingly, some inventive groups have even begun to post YouTube videos of their performances or create websites for their bands in order to maximize their exposure for potential employers! These „web advertisements“ usually provide cell numbers for interested parties to contact band leaders or managers. These pre-arranged (*ugovorene*) performances are more stable and often considered „superior“ to scenarios in which brass bands attempt to snag gigs „on the fly“ upon arriving in northern towns. In these situations, ensembles hope to find performances through being in the right place at the right time. Often, they choose to wait in front of municipal government buildings or

³⁶ A very few brass bands and musicians in Vranje have been able to perform even further abroad. Since 2000, one band in Vranje has occasionally been invited to perform for a month or more at a nightclub in Lebanon. Other musicians recently spoke of having made short trips of several weeks to perform in Dubai. In most cases, these are pre-arranged contracts with the proprietors of high-class establishments. Performers are usually guaranteed travel, food, drink, and accommodations in addition to receiving a set salary. Informants that spent 2 months in Lebanon in 2010 indicate that they were paid some 1000 euros per person every month! It is an excellent source of money, he says, because the band only performs a few songs on 3 or 4 evenings during the week- quite a small workload for such a sum! This band was not allowed to accept tips from guests, however, while playing.

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churches to catch weddings passing through; at other times, they will wait at the main bus and train stations hoping to be approached by potential patrons for quick performances. If they have no luck, ensembles may even take to playing in front of apartment buildings, or approach guests seated in cafes to try and make quick tips by playing one or two songs. The inherent risk in this „unplanned“ strategy makes it much less appealing for these traveling ensembles, and bands that operate in this way are often derided by other musicians. One older brass entertainer in Vranje disparaged musicians that gambled with luck in this way, telling me that he had heard of instances where ensembles were left stranded in Belgrade without enough money to return because they had had no luck in finding work. Because of the great distances these Vranje-based ensembles must travel to reach these northern towns, musicians must make sound calculations in order to keep this economic strategy a viable option for their ensembles.

It is precisely in the north, however, that many musicians hope to access the largest potential margin of profit for their services. Compared to the ruined southern Serbian economy, towns in northern Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia, and Slovenia enjoy somewhat higher standards of living. Belgrade has a population of 2 million, and Vranje's residents are well aware that residents of the capital have greater access to jobs and higher incomes than is the case in their own small town. Slovenia's regional economy was the strongest of all the republics in the former Yugoslavia, and it remains one of the richest of the new nations in the region. Vranje's brass musicians regularly speak about the different economic conditions elsewhere, and most explain that they have much greater chances at making decent profits while performing in the north. „Here in the south, however, music is dying...it's finished“, one young Roma brass band leader assured me. Many such musicians told me that good gigs in these non-local contexts might allow each ensemble member to make up to 100 or 150 euros over the course of a single weekend! An average month's wages for Vranje residents, in effect, may be garnered in the course of a few days for lucky brass performers in Belgrade, Novi Sad, or Ljubljana. These experiences encourage other Romani musicians trapped in the impoverished context of Vranje to seek out orchestras and bandleaders that have connections for obtaining performances in the north. As the demand for brass music spreads to urban spaces where residents are capable and willing to pay well for good entertainment, the professional ambitions of Romani musicians increasingly lay in tapping into these alternative, potentially lucrative performance spaces.

Yet these short-term working trips to northern towns do not represent a blanket cure for the economic and social challenges faced by Romani brass musicians in Vranje. Despite the lure of large tips, lucrative contracts, and greater prestige outside of Vranje, this traveling economic strategy is also

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fraught with risk and uncertainty. Many musicians complain of the difficulty of covering such large distances and transporting their instruments in order to reach performances. Others tell of suffering thirst, hunger, and exhaustion because the circumstances far from Vranje may not provide basic food and rest accommodations for musicians. Most importantly, however, the earnings of traveling bands remain uncertain and sporadic under even the best of circumstances. Although earnings can be much higher in the north, costs of travel and accommodations are new deductions that these musicians must account for. Fees and percentages must also go to managers on a regular basis, and these extra outputs also narrow the margin of profit in the musicians' earnings. Aside from being concerned about the unpredictability of receiving tips from celebrants, these traveling bands also worry about being cheated out of pre-arranged pay. Many brass bands in Vranje complain of having been „swindled“ at one time or another. One young brass leader was excited about an up-coming brass concert they had been asked to perform in Banja Luka; big name brass bands from Western Serbia were among the other guests slated to appear, and this young musician's manager had negotiated a very good deal with the concert organizers. When I spoke to him upon his return, however, I was shocked to hear that none of the bands that participated were paid for their performances! After the concert, the organizers were nowhere to be found and the bands had no way to redress this „robbery“. These new concerns for traveling brass bands are the result of the different dynamic inherent in performing „abroad“. These non-local performance contexts are not marked by personal familiarity between musicians and patrons, and changing times have reduced the institutional mechanisms in society that once protected traveling musicians in the former Yugoslavia. Performing in „foreign“ spaces, these musicians also cannot rely on the social networks and codes of conduct they use in Vranje to ensure fair conditions and remuneration for their services.

Moreover, these entertainers must interact with audiences that may have very different perceptions of the obligations these brass musicians have toward their patrons. On the one hand, many Romani musicians in Vranje argue that audiences in the north are less demanding than those in their home town. „It is far more difficult to satisfy patrons in Vranje“, one musician earnestly exclaimed. He explained that Vranje locals have higher standards for music and have a much longer tradition of appreciating brass music. Younger and smaller brass orchestras often lack the skills and repertoire to be able to adequately entertain at celebrations in Vranje, and so there are only a few very strong orchestras that are able to dominate the musical market in the region. Members of these larger orchestras often rely on notions of the „great pedigrees“ of performance in the histories of their bands; the successors of the Bakija Bakić orchestra, for example, disparage traveling brass bands as low-quality

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ensembles that are forced to seek work abroad as a result of their poor skills. Many musicians claim that it is precisely this „lack of knowledge” among northerners that has opened the window for these smaller orchestras to operate abroad. As long as a band can master a limited repertoire of songs made popular by Kusturica, Bregović, and Boban Marković, it is capable of satisfying northern audiences. “Kalašnjikov, Đurđevdan, Mesečina, and that’s that,” one musician summed up during one of our conversations. At the same time, however, the lack of “experience” that northerners have with Romani brass from Vranje can also be a source of conflict and harassment. Certain minimal codes of conduct that continue to structure performances in the south are not always applicable during performances farther abroad. One young musician complained that „people are different in the north“, telling me that they were often rough and callous with the band members. In the *kafanas* where many ensembles obtain gigs, patrons often become quickly inebriated and thus unpredictable. On occasion, ethnic slurs against these „foreign“ Romani entertainers may form part of the verbal abuse that drunken celebrants heap on these non-local musicians. Combined with other factors that contribute to the overall insecurity of these traveling musicians, coping with new audiences and different performing dynamics can be as problematic as it is essential. When I asked one young informant how he coped with aggressive clients abroad, he told me that the only thing musicians can do is „smile and take it“. Traveling brass bands are under great pressure to make these working trips financially viable, and as such musicians are often forced to accept or mediate less than ideal social and cultural conditions for performance. Combined with the highly economic language that governs these musical working migrations, different cultural perspectives on musical performance held by foreign audiences are now contributing to new discourses about performance, skill, and respect among traveling Romani brass musicians from Vranje.

Conclusion

As this analysis illustrates, regional economic, political, and social conditions were often affected in minute yet critical ways by the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. The changing predicament of professional musical performances in Vranje is a prime example of the ramifications of widespread political and economic chaos in the nation. The collapse of local industry and the transition from socialist to capitalist ideologies in government circles have thrown Vranje’s regional economy into a deep state of crisis. Expanding economic hardship has also resulted in rising ethno-national tensions as the material underpinnings of social interaction and exchange in the region collapse

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under the strain. As a result, Roma in Vranje are in effect being re-marginalized after the fall of Socialist Yugoslavia as new discourses about national identity are brought to the fore and increasingly linked to discussions of economic and political conditions. As local levels of poverty rise, the economic conditions and cultural traditions that once supported a diverse cadre of professional Romani musicians are rapidly disappearing.

Over the past decade, Romani musicians have taken to alternative strategies to maintain their incomes through musical performance. By capitalizing on the spreading fame of brass music abroad, these entertainers attempt to cultivate new markets for their performances in wealthier settings to the north of Vranje. These Romani brass musicians modify their repertoires and tweak their professional image to maximize their access to potentially lucrative venues far from their native regions. Musical professionalism takes on new meanings as these musicians look to artists such as Boban Marković and Goran Bregović in order to maintain broader popular appeal. Yet despite the heftier profits and greater excitement of performing for diverse audiences, many of Vranje's brass musicians have not succeeded in retaining the economic and social security they enjoyed in the former Yugoslavia. New discourses in their communities frequently denigrate these "working trips" for their financial riskiness and the uncertainty of dealing with "foreign" audiences. While these "musical migrations" in search of wealth and prestige seem to have a long tradition in Romani communities (Silverman 2007), it is evident that the political, economic, and historical moment is extremely significant in determining the relative value of such endeavors for professional entertainers. Research in Vranje indicates that the ideal conditions for musical performance increasingly popularized by media and pop culture are often a far cry from the uncertainty and difficulty these musicians face in the current moment in Serbia. In addition to investigating the new survival strategies of Vranje's Romani musicians, these new trends in musical work migrations must also be analyzed for their import in the ongoing negotiation of the economic, political, and cultural status of Roma in Vranje.

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