

The influence of shopping tourism on cultural changes and the way of life in Slovenia after World War II¹

From the beginning of the sixties on, Yugoslavia differed a great deal from other Eastern European countries. The difference did not only show in the political system but also in the personal standard of living, tourism, travelling, shopping abroad and imitating the western life style. In addition to that Slovenia had a specific position within Yugoslavia: bordering to Italy and Austria, and with strong national minorities in those countries, it was Yugoslavia's most developed and pro-west oriented region. This allowed Slovenia - with the exception of the first post-war years - to be constantly in touch with the two countries and to make realistic comparisons of the standard of living. Since the mid-fifties the authorities in Slovenia had been striving to approach the level of personal and social standard of living of the neighbouring capitalist countries. However, the system remained a socialist one, despite some capitalist elements it contained. It was based on egalitarianism, full employment, a high degree of social protection, as well as on the specific socialist ideology and morale. Community (collective), not the individual were given privileged position, although Slovenians are great individuals by nature. A blend of socialist system and capitalist influence from the west created an unusual atmosphere. People did believe in Tito, in self-management, in non-alignment but also in washing machines, refrigerators, TV sets and other postulates of consumer society. Since the laws of market economy and competitiveness were not being fully implemented, the production was unable to comply with the demands of the customers and fashion trends. As a result of that, the only real contact Slovene people had with western type consumerism in the sixties and also in the seventies was through shopping abroad, in which they frequently and readily indulged.²

Italy was the first window to the western world for the Slovene (and Yugoslav) people. Incising painfully in the life of people who had until then lived together, first within Austria-Hungary and later, between the two World Wars, under Italy, a new border - to the advantage of Yugoslavia - was set between the two countries in 1957. In some cases the border ran between the houses, crossed gardens, or even - as in the case of village Miren - divided the graveyard into two parts. (At funerals armed border guards are reported to have been present along the provisional demarcation in the graveyard and the coffin was literally pushed from one state to the other by the mourners in order to allow the relatives and friends from both states to take leave from the deceased).³ In order to preserve a small piece of land for their country, people used to move the provisional demarcation pales until the boundary stones were placed. The relations with Italy remained tense as long as until 1954 when the so called Trieste question was resolved by the London memorandum (the division of the Free Territory between Yugoslavia and Italy). Border crossings were therefore scarce; only people who lived within the 200 m frontier zone and the so called double owners (i.e. people who possessed land in both states) were entitled to them. The latter were allowed to take the shortest route to their land in the other state

¹ Repe, Božo. The influence of shopping tourism on cultural change and the way of life in Slovenia after World War II: paper at the conference Culture with frontiers: shopping tourism and travelling objects in post-war Central-Europe, Budapest, CEU Gellner Room, April 26-28, 1998. Budapest, 1998.

² Božo Repe: Turizma ni mogoče zavreti, čeprav bi ga prepovedali z zakonom (Tourism cannot be slowed down even if it was forbidden by law) Razvoj turizma v Sloveniji, Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije, 1996, str. 157-164.

³ Andrej Malnič: Topography of the memory of Zone A International Conference The Paris Peace Treaty, the new Yugoslavian-Italian borderline and the annexation of Primorska to Slovenia, Koper-Nova Gorica 25.-27. September 1997.

but forbidden to visit bigger villages or towns. In spite of the strict control on both sides of the border they did visit them (on Italian side they were frequently recognised by their “socialist” shoes or by the license plates on their bicycles). As the first buyers of western products people living along the frontier used to smuggle them to Slovenia. The goods were mostly hidden on bicycles or under the garments. One man even built a secret trolley line (lift) across the border to help himself at the smuggling (border guard caught him and he was sent into prison for two years).⁴ The most attractive smuggling articles being sugar, coffee, rice, lemons, medications, soap, cameras and other goods lacking in Slovenia (like blue copperas used in wine-growing and even scrubbing brushes and brooms). The shopping was predominantly based on exchange of goods; in return, meat, brandy, eggs and butter were smuggled to Italy (even today the story about a woman smuggling butter can be heard; hiding it under her blouse it melted and started to trickle exactly when she was at the border crossing). Some smugglers even had an agreement with the police whom they helped to purchase office materials, typewriters and similar. In the first half of the fifties foreign fashion articles became an attractive smuggling business; this was especially the case with a sort of raincoats made from synthetic material. The risky smuggling business paid well, and quite some people living along the border made enough money with it to be able to build themselves houses of their own.

In summer 1950 rumours spread along the Yugoslav - Italian border that the residents of the frontier zone from both states were to meet at all major border crossings. Three years after this region was divided by the frontier, the residents from both states were to meet their relatives, renew connections with friends and demonstrate their wish for coexistence. On 6 August, 1950 there was such a meeting at the border crossing Rozna dolina in Gorica and it should be repeated on 13 August, 1950. On that day thousands of people gathered - predominantly on the Yugoslav side - at the border crossing; they literally pulled it down and scattered subsequently along the streets and shops of Gorica. The unexpected “shopping spree” was described as the “march of the hungry” by the Italian press (although people were mainly buying scrubbing brushes /brooms/, which were lacking in Slovenia), but there was no report about the incident in the Yugoslav press. The press of the Slovene minority in Italy published the following: “On Sunday morning our people pulled down the unjust border at the check-point near Rdeca hisa (red house) and for half a day Gorica regained its position as the centre of Slovene people from the Soca (Isonzo) and Vipava region.”⁵ The author concluded that sooner or later the artificial frontier would have to be removed; but not just for a few hours. In his opinion the frontier should be moved to where it belongs, namely to the boundaries of the territory with Slovenian population on the other bank of the river Soča. There were other commentaries, i.e. in the Trieste workers’ newspaper *Il lavoratore* (which supported Kominform - at that time the conflict between Yugoslavia and The Soviet Union was at its height), which wrote: “The Tito government organised jointly with the Italian one a ‘legal’ crossing of the border to feed its people.” After this unusual incident the border remained tightly closed for the next five years, until the *Videm* (Udine) agreement was signed.⁶

In 1955 Yugoslavia and Italy signed an agreement on the local border (border land) traffic the so called *Videm* (Udine) agreement.⁷ It was the first agreement of its kind to be signed by a capitalist and a socialist state respectively during the period of the cold war. The right to crossing the border was expanded to all the population living along the frontier which

⁴ Questionnaire, realized by students in 1996 and 1997 in border area

⁵ *Primorski dnevnik*, 15 August, 1950.

⁶ Branko Marušič: *Z zahodnega brega* (From the west side), Nova Gorica 1995.

⁷ *Slovenija, Italija* (Slovenia, Italy, White book on Diplomatic relations, Ministrstvo za zunanje zadeve republike Slovenije (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia), Ljubljana 1996

resulted in vast increase of border crossings. People of these regions were particularly keen to visit diverse fairs (i.e. the fair of St. Andrew in Gorica), where they were buying cheap goods. One of the most popular articles was the so called "bambola" - a big baby doll clad in coloured dress; as decoration such dolls were placed on matrimonial beds. Further, people used to buy confetti (for marriages), chewing gum and typical Italian sweets. The goods purchased on Italian stands had a major influence on forming the taste of Slovenian and Yugoslav customers in the fifties, but also later on.

Double land owners were not allowed to enter Austria before 1953 when the agreements on frontier traffic and real assets of Austrian double owners on Yugoslav territory were signed.⁸ Apart from double land owners, in exceptional cases other residents of the frontier region were granted three-day permits for crossing the border, whereas there were no limitations for doctors, veterinarians and midwives. (In 1958 6000 and 5000 permits for crossing the border were issued on Yugoslav and Austrian side respectively). In 1960 an additional agreement on frontier traffic was signed, according to which residents of the 10 km frontier zone were allowed to enter Austria. These people received permanent permits for crossing the border; they were allowed to go abroad four times a month and stay there up to 60 hours. The same border crossing had to be used upon their return (the regular border crossings between Austria and Yugoslavia totalled 19). A Yugoslav citizen was allowed to take 3500.- dinars (about 12\$) abroad every month. However, due to its moderate range of goods available and higher price level, Austria was not as attractive as Italy for Yugoslav shoppers.⁹

People who were not living within the 10 km frontier zone were able to acquire a passport (either a personal, a family or a group passport). Passports were issued by the district departments for internal affairs; application for a passport could be refused without further explanation; further, passports were not issued to men who had not yet served the army. A visa was necessary for almost all the states; in addition to that, a Yugoslav citizen had to provide a letter of guarantee from the destination state. Until the beginning of the sixties administrative hindrances and also low standard of living prevented Yugoslav citizens from more frequent visits abroad; their travelling was restricted to business trips and visiting relatives. Quite a number of people crossed the border illegally and emigrated afterwards to overseas countries. In the second half of the fifties, however, tourism began to develop which resulted in more frequent visits of foreigners in Yugoslavia. A lot of them were attracted by diverse trade fairs. A gradual opening towards western culture in the late fifties and in the sixties was also demonstrated by organising fashion shows, song festivals (after San Remo festival in Italy) and miss competitions. In 1958 regular TV broadcast was introduced in Slovenia; in the sixties TV became a mass phenomenon.¹⁰ Its programme (western TV serials, films, music programmes and also commercials) additionally promoted the consumer mentality and affinity for western values; this everything enhanced the wish for travelling abroad. Most Slovenians were able to receive either some Austrian or Italian TV programme; their shopping decisions abroad were therefore frequently based on information gained from commercials. Some Italian and Austrian shop owners (especially those of Slovene origin) gradually started to advertise their products in Slovene newspapers and radio.

In the mid-sixties Yugoslavia opened up towards the world and the standard of living increased a great deal. Passport became available (with hardly any administrative hindrances) to the majority of the citizens; visas for the neighbouring countries were

⁸ Archive of government of Slovenia, Committee for internal Affairs and Committee for tourism and catering trade.

⁹ Questionnaire, realized by students in 1996 and 1997 in border area

¹⁰ Slovenska kronika 20. Stoletja (Slovene Chronicle of 20 th Century), Nova revija, Ljubljana 1996

gradually abolished. In 1962 Yugoslav citizens were allowed for the first time to purchase legally foreign currency in the amount of 15 000 dinars (50 US\$; a larger sum was only available for the purpose of medical treatment abroad and attending international meeting/conferences). It was possible to open a bank account for foreign currency. Masses of people went to Austria and Germany to work there; only through employment agencies 62347 Slovenian citizens found work in the west between 1964 and 1969 but there were even more people who moved to the west on their own.¹¹ For major holidays they were coming back home and bringing products from the west. The western shopping trend gradually moved from jeans (being one of the first citizens of Ljubljana wearing jeans in the fifties, the famous Slovenian actor Janez Hocevar still bears the nickname Rifle), tennis shoes (in Slovenia they are still called "superge", after the popular Italian trademark), cosmetics and washing powder towards washing machines, vacuum cleaners and other domestic appliances and even cars. I can remember purchasing a washing machine Candy (the most popular Italian make for domestic appliances of that time) in Trbiž (Tarvisio) with our neighbours who had already possessed a car. My mother possessed only a half of the necessary money, but the Slovenian dealer was willing to grant her a credit, so she could pay it on instalments (six months). During that time the Slovenian production and trade were gradually adapting to the needs of their customers: Gorenje started to produce domestic appliances which became popular in Eastern European countries in the following years; self-service stores and department stores started to emerge. However, the supply of goods in these shops was not as good as in the west and the prices were higher.

Like elsewhere in the world, towards the end of the sixties the teenage generation gradually became a very strong consumer group. The socialist supply of goods was not able to cover their demands for all sorts of notebooks with portraits of film stars, felt-tip pens, school bags, fashionable clothes, records and similar articles. Even if this was not so (like in the case of high-quality skis Elan), they were often considered to be inferior and the parents were forced to buy - with their modest socialist salaries - fashionable foreign makes of skis abroad.

As regards the standard of living, the seventies turned out to be the best post-war years for Yugoslavia (Slovenia). The non-aligned Arab friends had prevented Yugoslavia to suffer from the oil-shock; foreign loans were cheap - due to its specific position, they were literally forced upon Yugoslavia. The official policy had defeated the liberal orientation of the sixties; it wanted to prove that the self-managed socialism was the best system in the world.¹² With the help of cheap loans, a large number of Slovenians were building houses of their own in the seventies. Shopping abroad proved this tendency: building material which was either better in quality, cheaper, or not at all available in Yugoslavia was transported in car boots from abroad. The most popular articles purchased abroad were bathroom tiles, wash-basins, water-taps, furniture, diverse (garden) and other tools (even concrete-mixers). There was a great demand for domestic appliances, clothing articles, shoes (Italian shoes have remained to be a byword for quality, despite the good quality of Slovenian products), foodstuffs, spirits and items which were - due to ideological reasons - not available in Slovenia (communion and confirmation clothes, garlands, white shoes and handbags, etc.).

Another phenomenon of the seventies was the so called "Ponterosso", where cheap goods and gimcrack were sold. It attracted thousands of Yugoslav buyers who were coming as organised groups by regular trains, buses and cars even from the most distant parts of the

¹¹ Archive of Republic of Slovenia, fund of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People Koordinacijski odbor za delavce na začasnem delu v tujini (Coordinating Committee, for workers temporary working abroad)

¹² Božo Repe: «Liberalizem» v Sloveniji («Liberalism» in Slovenia), Borec, Ljubljana 1992

country,. They were buying everything, even most worthless goods. "Ponterosso" grew into a symbol of consumer mentality, adapted to socialist buyers with little money. Hiding purchases from the customs officers (duty free imports were limited to the value of 100 dinars only) was one of the favourite Yugoslav sports of the seventies, regardless the age or sex of the people involved.

Mass shopping in Italy was also a result of the so called Osimo agreements, which Italy in Yugoslavia - influenced by the spirit of Helsinki - signed in 1975.¹³ Yugoslav-Italian border became by far the most open border between a socialist and a capitalist country. In 1978 over 40 million people crossed the border in the Triest region (Trzaska pokrajina); 21 million with passports and 19 million with regular border permits. New border crossing points were opened but there were traffic hold-ups in spite of that, particularly during weekends; a phenomenon which had first started in the sixties. The frontier zone was increased to 30 km (the residents of Jesenice, a community bordering on Austria and Italy were so entitled to Austrian and Italian regular border permits). The authorities were not enthusiastic about shopping abroad because so much money was spent on it; but on the other hand, foreigners were shopping in Yugoslavia too, particularly petrol, meat and other food which was cheaper in Yugoslavia. Even more important was the ideological reason: how is it possible that people living "under the best system in the world" go shopping to Italy? From time to time therefore articles criticising shopping abroad appeared in newspapers, often with the comment that Yugoslav shoppers were being exploited by the capitalist traders. Particularly communists and public officials/civil servants were advised not to succumb to that shopping fever, but there were no sanctions and no other efforts to reduce shopping abroad (except for customs measures).

The third phenomenon of the seventies was the expansion of agency tourism/organised tourism. From the beginning of the seventies on, Yugoslav travel agencies had been organising holidays abroad, particularly in Spain, Italy and Tunisia; further, they organised shopping trips to the main European capitals and even USA (especially New York).¹⁴ Organised shopping tours focused on consumer electronics / audio systems (Munich was considered to be the best place to buy these products), or clothes and leather products (Istanbul).

In the eighties Yugoslavia glided into a crisis. The standard of living fell to the level of the mid-sixties. A number of products were rationed or not available at all (petrol, oil, washing powder, citrus fruits). Shopping abroad concentrated therefore on buying foodstuffs; and anyway, due to the growing inflation rate which in the mid-eighties grew to hyperinflation Yugoslav citizens were hardly able to afford to buy anything else. The geographic position of Slovenia allowed its citizens to compensate the shortage by weekly shopping trips abroad (and besides, the supply in Slovenia was better than elsewhere in Yugoslavia). The buying power improved in 1990 when the Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Marković froze the exchange rate of the national currency dinar in relation 1: 7 to German mark. For a period of a few months Slovenian salaries have reached the level of Italian and Austrian ones, which had an immediate effect on shopping across the border.¹⁵

After the crisis, which led to disintegration of Yugoslavia and consequently to independence of Slovenia, shopping abroad gradually normalised. Goods are abundantly available in shops at home, therefore shopping abroad is not a consequence of insufficient supply anymore; it is rather a matter of lower prices and (or) of prestige.

¹³ Slovenija, Italija (Slovenia, Italy, White book on Diplomatic relations, Ministrstvo za zunanje zadeve republike Slovenije (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia), Ljubljana 1996

¹⁴ Archive of government of Slovenia, Committee for tourism and catering trade, Chamber for economy.

¹⁵ Archive of government of Slovenia, meetings of Government in 1990.

Border crossings, shopping abroad and travelling have importantly influenced the life style of Slovene people in the post-war decades. They sharpened their sense of quality and influenced domestic production and trade which made effort to reach the western standards. Shopping abroad further exerted indirect pressure on politics, which was - at least to some extent - forced to take account of the demands of consumers and act accordingly. It has to be mentioned however, that shopping was limited - particularly in the fifties and in the first half of the sixties - by the low standard of living. In the course of time a specific consumer ritual was established, a sort of shopping fever to which the majority of Slovenians (and even more Yugoslavs) succumbed. A typical feature of that attitude was that people did not only buy products they really needed. When abroad they had to "take the opportunity" to make the journey "worth the money and time" it took and therefore used to buy everything that came to their hands. This philosophy was in perfect agreement with the belief that saving and rational spending of money made no sense, since in socialism the state was believed to be responsible for providing housing, regular income and solving other problems of the citizens (however, not everything could be implemented and especially Slovenians tended to be more economical; a lot of them bought flats or built houses on their own).

Shopping tourism was only one of the influences that formed the post-war socialist consumer mentality in Slovenia. Its impact has to be seen within a broader context, together with films, music, television, mass motorization, expanding of foreign tourism in Slovenia and economic emigration.¹⁶ Everything this led to the fact, that Slovenians accepted western standards and behaviour patterns as regards the style of home decor, clothing and spending leisure time as early as in the "liberal" sixties (in the second half of the seventies, for example, the more affluent citizens already had access to international credit cards, including American Express). People took from socialism what was of use to them (free schooling, good health services, full employment), whereas ideology that filled political speeches, newspaper articles and TV news was perceived as the necessary evil. During the last two decades, the self-managed socialism was hardly taken seriously by anyone. This was probably also due to the fact, that both, regime critics and party officials met on their shopping tours across the border.¹⁷

¹⁶ Slovenska kronika 20. Stoletja (Slovene Chronicle of 20 th Century), Nova revija, Ljubljana 1996.