

Fall 2009

“We Didn’t Choose to Live in a Transition Society:” The Youth of Milošević’s Serbia Ten Years Later

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“We Didn’t Choose to Live in a Transition Society:”

The Youth of Milošević’s Serbia Ten Years Later

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Balkans: Post-Conflict Transformation in
Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2009

Table of Contents:

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5-7
Methodology and Limitations.....	7-8
On the Participants.....	9-10
Themes and Topics of Analysis.....	11-10
On the Researcher.....	11-12
Literature Review.....	13-16
Narratives of the Past.....	16-33
Themes and Topics of Analysis.....	16-17
On Economic Consequences.....	18-21
On the NATO Bombing.....	21-25
On the 5 th of October.....	25-27
On Zoran Đinđić.....	27-30
Issues of Memory and Retrospect.....	30-31
On Position and Perception as Children.....	31-33
Current Events.....	33-40
On The European Union.....	33-36
On Corruption.....	36-37
On the Greatest Challenges.....	37-39
On Complacency.....	39-40
Contrasting Refugee Narratives.....	40-45
Conclusions and Discussion.....	46-49
Recommendations for Further Study.....	49-50
Appendices.....	50-53

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people, without whom this project would not be possible: My gracious and generous hosts in Belgrade/ Kruševac: Anja and the Živković Family, Vukašin Čobeljić, and Dušanka Mrvoš. The wonderful SIT staff: Orli Fridman, Gordana Borić, and Marija Bošnjak. Svetlana “Ceca” Kijevčanin Mladen Lazić. Jennifer Listug in France. My colleagues and friends in Belgrade: Marisa Bateman, Julie Bularzik, and Nicole Wilke, and most importantly, the thirteen individuals who took time to share a part of their lives past and present with me.

Abstract

The 1990's were an extremely dark time in modern Serbian history, mired by wars, sanctions, dictatorship, and struggle. Those who came of age in that time find their entire lives to be defined by their country's transition process. Because of this experience, these individuals are in a unique position to make connections between past conflicts and present challenges in Serbia. In particular, through understanding their narratives of this recent past and their perceptions of Serbia's current progress in its transition phase, one can glean a better picture of this generation and what it holds for Serbia's future. In allowing these narratives to surface, an alternative understanding of both the past and present can be created and embraced.

Introduction

While the 1990's were a time of prosperity and peace for Americans, they were one of the darkest periods since the Second World War for the inhabitants of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Serbia, the largest of these former republics, is no exception to this tragic rule. Throughout this time, wars raged in the state's neighbors, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, followed a few years later by conflict and ethnic cleansing in the nation's autonomous province of Kosovo. With each new calamity, average people in Serbia found themselves at the whim of the increasingly authoritarian regime of the charming and charismatic communist-turned nationalist, turned opportunist, Slobodan Milošević.¹

Following the increasingly brutal nature of these events, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, later Serbia and Montenegro, and later Serbia, faced international isolation, sanctions, hyperinflation, and the general disintegration of daily life and services. This strife culminated in the NATO bombing of the country, at the time called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (consisting of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro) in the spring of 1999.² These punishments for Serbia's de-facto, though publicly unofficial, role in the carnage of the Balkans, did not destabilize the regime, rather they served to embolden the self-serving and egocentric tendencies of a government that was quick to retreat, leaving its citizens to fend for themselves.

These consequences of Milošević's policies had painful and often dire costs for the ordinary people of Serbia, many of whom, especially in larger cities, did not support his regime

¹ While Milošević certainly began his political career as a member of the Yugoslav communist party, he was quick to turn to nationalist and later to anti-western rhetoric. Gordy, Eric D. *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park,: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

² The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisted of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro. Throughout much of the West, the synecdoche of "Serbia" was used to refer to the country, as many felt that Serbia was the hegemonic unit under the Milošević regime. Off, Carol. "Massacre at Podujevo, Kosovo." *CBC News*, 29 Mar. 2004. Web. 9 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/balkans/crimesandcourage.html>>.

or Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).³ In particular, nearly a decade of crippling economic sanctions, hyperinflation, the decay of infrastructure, international isolation, war, and generalized poverty and hardship left the citizens of Serbia feeling, “like someone wanted to put (them) in a ghetto for twenty years,” frustrated and hopeless.⁴

As I began to consider this recent history of tremendous hardship, I consulted narratives of daily life currently available. The more I read, the more I noticed the conspicuous absence of works considering the impact of the events of the 1990’s on individuals in their formative years. The exploits and experiences of the youth of that era are left largely unexplored in scholarly projects, relegated to the realm of speculation.⁵ The goal of conducting an exploratory study, to not only chronicle these narratives, but to attempt to contextualize how those who came of age during this time feel about social change and progress in contemporary Serbia, soon emerged. The narratives provide an alternative vision of Serbia during the Milošević years, of not merely a violent pariah state, but as a place in which creativity, wit, and friendship flourished parallel to the burdens of the era.

Particularly redolent within the texts of the interviews I conducted are the narratives of life at the whims of economic consequences, like hyperinflation, sanctions, and scarcity, political consequences, like the death of prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. Most importantly, the participants in this project represent the generation whose entire lives have been defined by Serbia’s

³ Though the Milošević regime faced growing opposition throughout the 1990’s the Socialist party candidates (Milošević’s Party) managed to win pluralities and majorities on both national and local political levels. The only exception to this was in the local elections of 1996. Judah, Tim. “Serbia: Is the Good News Old News?” *Serbia Matters: Domestic Reforms and European Integration*. Belgrade: Lmmorent d.o.o’, 2009, pp. 25-31.

⁴ Interview with Jasna, aged 33 in Belgrade, 1 December 2009.

⁵ The one notable exception to this rule is the detail with which student protests in 1996-1997 were covered in Lazić, Mladen (ed.). *Winter of Discontent: Protest in Belgrade*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1997. However, these specific events were not a major priority nor topic of discussion for the respondents to this project.

transitional period. Their narratives, memories, and opinions provide a unique insight into the connection between this recent past and the present conditions of their country. Through the vivid stories, memories, and musings of these respondents, one can glean a richer and more complex picture of life as an adolescent in a country immersed in its own turbulent adolescence. Within these complex and often dark narratives rests the foundation of a new Serbia for a new century.

Methodology and Limitations

For this project, I choose to employ traditional qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary source of data. This methodology is particularly useful in this case study because the focus of the paper concerns an alternative set of narratives of past events. As these narratives have not been frequently chronicled in previous scholarship, primary source contact is the paramount method for gathering data.

In this case study, I choose semi-structured interviews specifically because this approach enables participants to explore the themes and ideas that appealed most to them. Within these interviews, I did include specific prompts and queries about the topics I felt would be important to discuss in this research. Whenever I sought to elicit particular information, I would insert my specific queries into the natural flow of a participant's conversation in order to provide maximum comfort for that individual.

During these interviews, I chose to direct the general flow of conversation around a certain set of topics. The particular subject matter I choose to emphasize, were descriptions of economic hardship in the 1990's (sanctions, shortages, inflation, and generalized poverty and crime), interpretations of the 5th of October, 2000, the legacy of late Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, the implications of Serbia's attempted to integrate into the European Union and the

international community after more than a decade of mediocrity and isolation, and perceptions of contemporary challenges for Serbia. I chose these topics because I view them as key facets of both society and social change. To merely ask a respondent if they see social change is to throw them into unfamiliar and nebulously defined territory, often leaving them confused or unable to answer in tangible, details. By analyzing many factors of social, political, and economic life I am better able to grasp the broadest possible picture of contemporary Serbia and the complex and contented process by which it is changing. Through this understanding and analysis, the influences of this environment upon those came of age in it becomes visible, enabling one to understand where, why, and how Serbia is heading upon it's present course.

The second major goal of this project is to provide a forum for alternative narratives of Serbia in the 1990's to emerge. While there are many detailed and well-written accounts of life in Milošević's Serbia, that catalogue is missing exhaustive research into the ideas and opinions of those who came of age in that regime. It is a goal of this project to fill in some small part of that gap, by allowing those who were adolescents in Milošević's Serbia to take a deep breath and speak out about their memories and experiences.

On the Participants

In order to better interpret results, it is important to include some social data, such as age, gender, place of origin, educational level, and family class background of the participants in this study. This information enables the reader and the author to better understand and contextualize the narratives presented in this paper. In my time in Belgrade, I conducted thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals aged twenty-two to thirty-six years. Each of these individuals is granted protected anonymity, as only pseudonyms are included. In terms of

gender, eight interviewees were women and five were men, though it seemed as though gender had little influence on the data, as I will explore further.

It is important to note that subjects included in this paper hail from several locations in both Serbia and present-day Croatia. (This is especially important because the core of support for the Milošević regime was outside of the capital city, Belgrade.) While I conducted seven of the interviews in Belgrade, only four of participants are originally from Belgrade. Three hail from Kruševac, a small industrial city of about 110,000 inhabitants in south-central Serbia. Two were from Niš, Serbia's second largest city, located in the south near the Macedonian border. One was from Novi Sad, in the Vojvodina region, to the north of Belgrade. Another was from the small and somewhat isolated town of Aleksandrovac, though he asserted his own strong connections with rural Serbia. Perhaps worthy of particular distinction is the fact that of these participants, two were refugees, one from Vukovar and one from Knin who had since made their lives in Serbia (I will provide a detailed comparison of these two portraits later).⁶

Aside from those vital statistics, education levels and class background are also important in understanding and interpreting the data from my interviews. All but two had bachelor's degrees, two were in PhD programs, two were in Master's degree programs, and two were high

⁶ Vukovar was prior to 1991 an ethnically mixed town (47.2 % Croat, 32.3% Serb, and 9.8% Yugoslav) in the Slavonia region of Croatia, located across the Danube river border from Serbian territory. In 1991, after the Republic of Croatia moved to succeed from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), or old Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Army (JNA) began intensive shelling of the city. After an intensive three month siege the town was finally taken over by the JNA and ethnically cleansed. Kardov, Kruno. "Remember Vukovar." *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education, and Media*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 2007. Knin is a town located in south-central Croatia close to that country's border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. From 1990 until 1995 it belonged to the independent and self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Krajina and served as its capital. In August of 1995, Croatian forces launched Operation Storm, a ground operation to reclaim Croatian territory under Serb control. Prior to Operation Storm, the town's population was predominantly Serbs. Following that military operation, approximately 150,000-200,000 Serb refugees fled to Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as to Serbia proper (to the Vojvodina region in particular). *The Death of Yugoslavia*. BBC documentary, 1995.

school graduates. All but two considered themselves as having come from an “average, middle class, normal Serbian family.”⁷ One described himself as from a family of “liberals who were the minority at that time.”⁸ One also described her family as, “having a lot,” prior to evacuating and become refugees.⁹ These class distinctions are important in understanding and contextualizing the social position of these individuals prior to 1991 in order to understand how they adapted to the conditions of generalized poverty and hardship in Serbia. They allow one to place a respondent with the social structure of their time and place and better contextualize their narratives. When considering these narratives of the past, this objective social data allows one to better understand the degree to which individuals and their families were forced to adapt to a new circumstance.

Themes and Topics of Analysis

Within the context of the interviews for this project, several significant themes emerged repeatedly. These patterns lead me to categorize these descriptions around particular topics of particular salience to those who came of age in the Serbia of the Milošević regime. While each interview was semi-structured, which allowed respondents the freedom to explore the topics and memories they found most redolent for them, I did include questions and discussions of eight specific topics in both 1990’s and contemporary Serbia. These topics are: a general description of pre-1991 life in Yugoslavia, recollections of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, accounts of the consequences of Serbia’s economic isolation (hyperinflation, shortages, and generalized poverty), the politics of the Milošević regime, the NATO bombing of 1999, the assassination of

⁷ Interview with Boban, aged 33, from Niš 4th of December, 2009

⁸ Interview with Dragan, aged 23 from Belgrade. 1st of December 2009

⁹ Interview with Ljubica, aged 26 from Knin December 3, 2009.

Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, Serbia's current attempts at European integration, and what respondents view as the significant challenges for contemporary Serbia. Through this emphasis on both narratives of the past and perceptions of the present, I hoped to understand the influence of the environment of the 1990's on the development of individuals' views of society and social change.

Aside from presentation and analysis of the most common and predominant themes and narratives, I also believe it is necessary to include a comparison of the narratives of experience of the two subjects who came to Serbia as refugees. This may be of particular interest because my conversations with the two women yielded strikingly similar accounts of the refugee experience as well as vastly different analyses of contemporary issues and problems in Serbia. I will discuss why I believe the opinions of these two differ so greatly.

On the Researcher

As an undergraduate student in Sociology, I am particularly interested in understanding how societies change and how individuals perceive and contextualize themselves within that change. Serbia provides a fertile ground for those interested in understanding transition and transformation. Following two months of travel throughout Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia, I realized that the experience of youth during Serbia's greatest upheavals in the 1990's is an underappreciated narrative. I felt a certain kinship with young people whose lives had been dictated by systemic events far beyond their control. As I began to develop these ideas further, I sought to provide a forum for these young people to tell their stories.

As with any qualitative project, it is important to consider the influence of the researcher upon the subjects. In the case of the in-depth interview, which the researcher is, not only in

terms of personal identity categories, but also how she is perceived by respondents in of enormous import. Like any conversation, the interview is an interpersonal interaction in which both participants must both engage and compromise.¹⁰ My goal as the researcher was to enable participants to divulge as much information as possible without biasing their results through our interaction. It is fair analysis to describe the ways in which certain pieces of information I shared with the respondents may have altered their responses, or at least leaving them to feel as though they had to explain things in terminology with which I am familiar.

The most obvious basic fact about me, which I can assume, influenced how participants engaged in these interviews, is the issue of my nationality. Because I am a foreigner, coming from the West, participants in this study certainly felt the need to clarify many basic facts of recent history and issues for me. The transcripts of these interviews provide numerous examples of this, with respondents frequently asking questions that began, “Are you familiar with...” “Do you know about...” and, “Have you heard of...” As one respondent began explaining a traditional hog rearing ceremony in the village in which his grandparents live he reminded me that, “it may seem absurd to (me) because (I) come from America.”¹¹

Aside from my obvious status as a foreigner, I was also left to consider how my age might influence the responses provided. In general, I did not disclose my age, as I was concerned that it would surprise many respondents, perhaps leading them to feel that they could not discuss certain topics, because they would be beyond my comprehension. The few times my age did manage to somehow explicitly become a topic of conversation; respondents were

¹⁰ As my abilities in the Serbian language remain rather limited, I will only be able to access news sources that also print in English. This of course will provide me with a limited spectrum of viewpoints, as certain ultra-nationalist publications may stay away from using English language, or even the Latin alphabet in their works.

¹¹ Interview with Miloš, aged 23, from Aleksandrovac, in Belgrade 3 December 2009.

generally surprised to learn that I am twenty years old.¹² In one interview, a respondent explicitly referenced my age; her sentiments are referenced below:

Svetlana: “If you are probably, how old?”

Me: Twenty. Twenty-one almost. I was born in 1989.

Svetlana: Gasps. (Disbelief) 1989? Well you have to celebrate the fall of the wall.”

Svetlana’s disbelief at the difference between our ages, she is thirty-three, thirteen years my senior. Aside from this one incident, however, that I concealed my age from the participant seemed to benefit the project, in that respondents generally felt comfortable conveying accurate and detailed narratives.

Limitations

Because this project was conducted over the course of thirty days it is inherently limited. Ideally, a project consisting of in-depth interviews concerned with narratives of the past would include a much larger and more diverse sample of the target population. That I am not proficient enough in Serbian language also limited the number of perspective respondents. This is particularly important when considering the viewpoints presented in this analysis.

When considering, the viewpoints of the respondents in this study, the lack of right-wing or nationalist perspectives, certainly limits the degree to which generalizations can be made. Despite this limitation, the respondents in this study do represent individuals of a more liberal viewpoint. This may be seen as connected to their educational and class backgrounds.

¹² A group of young people I encounter in Kragujevac, a larger city in central Serbia, insisted that I was twenty-five or twenty-six, when I told them my age. It was only when my host, with whom I have lived and spent nearly two months, vouched for me as a twenty-year old did they believe me. I am still not entirely sure if this is a positive or negative comment, but certainly downplaying my age seemed to help respondents in expressing their narratives.

Ultimately, the narrow focus of the population in this study is the major challenge to strong theory building in this work.

Literature Review

There is significant research about the specific implications of sanctions and isolation of countries. These works analyze these implications in terms of both social and political life. Eric D. Gordy's *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* analyzes the effects of the choices of the Milošević regime. He chronicles the ways in which generalized economic hardship served to imbue in the populous a sense of dismay and apathy.¹³ While this project includes excellent and vivid detail of most every aspect of life in 1990's Serbia, it does not focus specifically on the experience of young people at that time. Additionally, as this account was produced in 1999, it does not include any narratives of the past ten years. This work provides an important starting point to contextualize the narratives I will encounter.

Because much of this project concerned narratives of the past, some of which were certainly highly personal or intimate, I found it to be essential to consider the challenges individuals may face in confronting a difficult past. Maryanne Yerkes's article "Facing the Violent Past: Discussions with Serbia's Youth" confronts the tensions emergent in crafting working narratives of Serbia's recent past with young people.¹⁴ She describes this as the, "complexities of the facing process in Serbia."¹⁵ While Yerkes seeks to understand the process of collective responsibility, I hope to contextualize individual experiences of hardship within the

¹³ Gordy, p. 13.

¹⁴ Yerkes, Maryanne. "Facing the Violent Past: Discussions with Serbia's Youth." *Nationalities Papers* 32.4 (2004), pp. 921-38.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 938.

historical backdrop of the choices of political elites. The issues addressed in the article concerning respondents willingness to engage on certain topics, particularly of collective responsibility for war crimes was especially helpful. As I will discuss later, overall respondents chose not to explore that topic, or did so very hesitantly, instead focusing on the impact of hardships on their own lives.

Aside from the significant amount of research on the past, I also consulted several sources about contemporary Serbia. I used these sources in order to better grasp the significant changes have occurred in the country and region, since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. Concerning the major political changes in Serbia since the assassination of the posthumously beloved opposition leader turned Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić, I drew inspiration from a scholarly report by the International Crisis Group (here after the ICG), an international policy analysis group based in Brussels.¹⁶ In a report included in a larger set of writings on the Balkans, the ICG describes the delay in carrying out any of the late prime minister's reforms posthumously. The paper characterizes this chaotic environment, a mere six days after the death of what it considers Serbia's, and "most skilful and realistic politician."¹⁷ Because the late Prime Minister embodied hope and the start of a new political era for so many in Serbia, young and old alike, understanding his death and how the country may move on in its wake is crucial to understanding how young people in Serbia perceive their country today.

There is also an array of scholarly articles pertaining to specific aspects of life in 1990's Serbia, which enabled me to better contextualize many of the narratives I encountered. Several chapters from the anthology *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* include

¹⁶ "Serbia After Đinđić." International Crisis Group (ICG) Report no. 141. March 2003.

¹⁷ Prime Minister Đinđić was assassinated in front of a government building in Belgrade on the 12 of March, 2003. The ICG working paper was released on the 18 of March, 2003. Ibid.

significant detail on the processes of manipulation and control of the state at the time. Of particular interest relevance to this project is Stjepan Gredelj's article "War, Crime, Guilt, Sanctions."¹⁸ His survey research into attitudes of ordinary adult citizens includes many helpful categories for analysis and approaches to asking about such sensitive materials.

In addition to understanding the background of the 1990's and how individuals cope with it, I also leaned heavily upon sources covering current affairs in Serbia. I used to domestic Serbian news sources including the Belgrade Insight as well as the independent news corporation B-92's online content. Because these particular sources are both popular among ordinary Serbian citizens I felt that they provided a very strong general picture of the media many Serbian citizens consume. I additionally drew inspiration from Western news media outlets, in particular the BBC and National Public Radio. Ultimately, these sources allowed me to build a basis of understanding and context for the voices I encountered. Each provided insightful and helpful information and perspectives.

Narratives of the Past

It is, however, first important to discuss the dominant narratives of the past, including the overwhelming similarity in how respondents characterized their experiences. Perhaps the most striking pattern within the data was the tremendous uniformity in respondents' descriptions of the various facets of daily life in the 1990's. In many cases specific language was mirrored by multiple respondents, in addition to the general framework of experience with the hardships brought by Serbia's isolation in the 1990's. The most dominant and persistent narratives centered around four specific subjects: the economic consequences of isolation and sanctions, the

¹⁸ Gredelj, Stjepan. "War, Crimes, Guilt, Sanctions," in Ivana Spasić and Milan Subotić (eds.), *R/evolution and Order: Serbia after October 2000*. Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, 2001. Pp. 241-61.

NATO bombing, the fifth of October, 2000, and memories and characterizations of the late Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić.

On Economic Consequences

The economic consequences of isolation and sanctions touched the lives of ordinary citizens of Serbia, in particular the lives of those who were youth and children. The respondents in this study echo the common narratives of shortages, empty store shelves and a flourishing black market. One man with whom I spoke characterized his experience with generalized poverty as, “surviving, not living.”¹⁹ The ways in which respondents for this project managed to cope, survive, and thrive are as unique as the individuals themselves, however they share the common narrative of poverty and hardship as the rule, rather than the exception during their youth.

A major consequence of the economic deterioration in 1990's Serbia, hyperinflation, is characterized in strikingly similar terms by a large number of respondents. In both diction and detail, the stories provided to me through interviews reveal a relatively uniform picture of daily experiences in the time of currency with, “Many, many, many zeroes,”²⁰ Descriptions of life as, “the inflation was going crazy again,”²¹ emphasize the details of how, “money was just a piece of paper.”²² One young man, Miloš of Aleksandrovac, described a scene of his experience with deflated currency as follows:

“And of course I remember the bank of notes with a lot of zeros. On moment I especially remember when I my father and I were walking down the

¹⁹ Interview with Boban, 4 December, 2009

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with Tanja, aged 29 from Vukovar, in Novi Sad 1 December 2009.

²² Interview with Dragan, 1 December 2009.

street...and he found a bank note...and it was for ten million dinars and he said, “Oh this is my whole salary!” And he picked it up...and just ran towards the bank to change the dinars into German Marks because inflation was so high that in one moment...”²³

Miloš’ recollection of his father’s low salary is also mirrored by the narratives of the struggles to purchase the basics. The recollections of Dragan, a young man hailing from Belgrade in which his parents, “would get (their) salary in the morning, and by the evening...could just buy bread.”²⁴ This struggle to meet basic needs in the face of inflation and stagnant wages is chronicled by another respondent from Belgrade in almost identical language. This young woman characterized daily life at that time as a world in which, “You are going to your job and you are getting your salary and when you are coming home with your salary you can buy like one piece of bread.”²⁵ The experience of shortages of everything, even the most basic food items is described by as another respondent from Niš as, “surviving not living...on five dollars a month.”²⁶

It is particularly interesting to note that these particular respondents differ in age by nearly ten years, with the oldest being thirty-three and the youngest twenty-three at the times of the interviews. Because of such a vast difference in age, with some in their late teens and some in early adolescence, one would expect narratives to vary somewhat, yet much of the two stories are almost identical, with certain words and phrases repeated verbatim in each account. I believe that this hegemony of narrative provides credibility to each respondent, as many details are all but corroborated by peers and colleagues. These results however, may not be entirely

²³ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009

²⁴ Interview with Dragan, 1 December 2009.

²⁵ Interview with Nađa, 27 November 2009.

²⁶ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

conclusive, nor representative, in that no one in my study openly identified himself or herself as pro-Milošević in those times. With these results one is left to wonder if incorporating additional perspectives on these events would emerge. This may lend itself to further study.

Similar to the problems of inflations and shortages, another key aspect of the economic hardships were the shortages and long waits for provisions. Several respondents described waiting in lines to buy oil, to buy bread, for extended periods of time because such goods could not be found with legitimate merchants.²⁷ One respondent characterizes his own involvement in this system:

“And I remember those lines when provisions came with legal channels, but there were not enough and you (had to) wait in line for that little amount...because I was little, my parents thought that I could be the first one to get in the line...And I just stood in the lines for three or four hours...just to have one bottle of oil, and I don’t know one pound of sugar or flour. It was obscene.”²⁸

This experience is also described in vivid detail by Jelena, a woman aged twenty-nine originally from Kruševac, now in Belgrade. Below she enumerates what her mother was able to purchase with her salary in 1993, during the heart of the economic crisis.

“And, the next day she came back with two small bags of yeast. And I remember my father bringing home huge bags of flour, because you couldn’t buy normal sized bags of flour.”²⁹

During these periods of tremendous hardship and dearth many adolescents, realized that it is really hard to live without the basics, without water, without electricity, all the things that you take for granted.³⁰ Here, Tanja, aged twenty-nine, articulates the ways in which such

²⁷ Interview with Nađa, aged 22 from Belgrade, in Belgrade 24 November 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009

²⁹ Interview with Jelena, aged 29, from Kruševac, in Belgrade, 24 December 2009.

³⁰ Interview with Tanja, 1 December 2009.

hardships, influenced her as an adolescent, forcing her to become aware of issues and concerns, like the meeting of basic necessities, earlier than she would have in a different situation. For her and others like her, the lack of basic necessities made the consequences and choices of their regime painfully real and extraordinarily personal.

As the most basic provisions like bread, milk, and heating oil became increasingly difficult to find by legitimate means, many turned to illegal black markets, or grey economy.³¹ This illicit, though frequently tolerated, economic activity enabled ordinary citizens to obtain goods, provided income for other, and created a wealthy class of smugglers with close connections (and tacit approval of) the Milošević regime. One young woman described her experience in the gray economy as follows:

“I remember being thirteen and I wanted some pocket money...when I heard that one of my neighbors sold cigarettes on the street...I asked my parents if one of them or both of them would go with me to borrow some money so that I could buy up some cigarettes and sell them to make some profit for myself and buy myself something...my father went with me, and we bought up some cigarettes, a carton or so and I sold that and earned 100 German Marks. Then I could buy myself a tape recorder and a new basketball and some socks and I think a new pair of sneakers, and I think that I still have a sweatshirt that I bought then. So it was pretty good, although I risked being arrested...because...it was illegal to sell cigarettes. I think that one time a police man approached me and I was holding cigarettes in my hand...and he asked me for my name and stuff like that...I gave a wrong address and I lied about my name, and then I ran off...so I saved the rest of my goods...I stopped doing that after that.”³²

Jelena’s participation in illegal sales may seem shocking because of how young she was at the time; however her story is not uncommon. What may be surprising to Western observers is her father’s complacency in his daughter’s illegal activity. Without the initial financial support of her parents, Jelena’s entire venture would not have been possible. The ease with

³¹ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009

³² Interview with Jelena, 19 November 2009

which she characterizes her parent's consent is telling of the atmosphere and attitudes of those years in which, "criminals were the most appreciated people in society."³³

Interestingly, Jelana's admission of participation in the grey economy in the 1990's was the only such narrative I encountered during my research. However, because of the high rate of criminal trade in Serbia in that period, it is almost certain that given a wider sample, I would have found respondents with similar experiences. In that way, Jelena's experience may be seen as representative of many individuals in her cohort, as well as the general propensity for participation in illicit economic activities during the Milošević years. Her story illustrates in very specific terms the economic costs and consequences of the economic isolation and eventual decay of Serbia in the 1990's.

The above narratives, while strikingly similar, convey an important and accurate portrait of the experience of young people during the economic crisis in Serbia. While the issues of retrospect and memory certainly influence the manner in which respondents represented their memories to me, that so much of language and affect used to convey their stories served to corroborate their peer's perspectives. Through this data, one can glean a clear picture of how directly such hardships touched the lives of youth, forcing them to contemplate issues often beyond their years at the time. The culture of survival described by many respondents is also of particular salience in how they perceive the current situation in their country. Many participants in this study see these economic challenges as a key influence on contemporary social and political discourse and belief in Serbia. I will, in a later section, elaborate on the major parallels respondents drew between past and present hardship.

³³ Interview with Jovan, 1 December 2009.

On the NATO Bombing

While the economic hardships of the 1990's were an on-going challenge, the NATO bombing of 1999, while lasting a mere three months, also left a profound impact upon the ordinary youth of Serbia. As with the narratives of economic hardship, there was a large degree of hegemony in how individual respondents characterized their experience in the bombing.

Frequently, young people emphasized the ways in which their lives differed than in ordinary circumstances. In particular, the fact that schools were closed and transport was limited forced individuals to create their own little micro world.³⁴ Rather than describe the event as a tragedy, most respondents looked back on the time positively. Again, the hegemony of narrative appeared, with almost identical syntactical characterizations of the NATO bombing period as, "one of the best times of my life," by Dragan, who was thirteen at the time and living in Belgrade.³⁵ This same sentiment was expressed by Dunja who was twenty and residing in New Belgrade.³⁶ She explicitly stated, "The NATO bombing was one of the best periods of my life."³⁷ When I asked her to elaborate, Dunja's response was to characterize her reaction as, "a bit masochistic," emphasizing that socialization was a way to maintain emotional and mental health in the wake of facing danger and profound terror.

In addition to the general characterization of the bombing as a time for socialization and interpersonal connection, the specific activities mentioned were also very similar among many respondents. Boban, who was twenty-three at the time while living in Niš, described how he and

³⁴ Interview with with Tanja, 1 December 2009.

³⁵ Interview with with Dragan, 1 December 2009.

³⁶ New Belgrade, "Novi Beograd" in Serbian was added to the city during the socialist era. It consists of many large apartment buildings and high rises; in many ways it embodies the concept of the centrally planned socialist-style city.

³⁷ Interview with Dunja, 4 December 2009.

his fellow students, “just made a lot of parties...and a lot of babies were conceived in that time because we had nothing else to do.”³⁸ Nađa, who was twelve during the bombings, described that period as one in which she, “had very good friend connections...and had fun.”³⁹ For the most part, respondents were insulated, often by choice and distraction, from the chaos and hardship of the event itself. As Tanja, who was nineteen and living in Novi Sad characterized it:

“And [so it was] like, okay my friends are here, we are playing cards, chatting with people, and hanging out. If we had electricity and internet we would be chatting with people in America in Western Europe and you can talk to somebody and feel more and more normal, out of the situation.”

The desire to feel a sense of normality and safety led to this intense and almost constant socialization and recreation. Ultimately as a consequence of such closeness and isolation from outside influences, people became closer, or at least more intimate than in previous times.⁴⁰

When considering these narratives, it is however important to remember that these narratives come from the perspective of adolescents at that time. These stories and perspectives differ greatly from narratives of adult voices at that time. In her personal account of the NATO bombing in Belgrade, *The Diary of a Political Idiot: Normal Life in Belgrade*, Jasmina Tešanović, characterizes her experiences at that time in a vastly different manner. As a middle-aged woman with children of her own, Tešanović describes her encounter with young people in Belgrade and contrasts it to her own experience:

“...I was surrounded by the happy, pretty faces of young schoolgirls. It was a group of ballet dancers coming back from a successful performance. I thought of their parents somewhere, gray and tired and anxious like me, young-old people gone half crazy with fear and worry...I looked through the window at downtown Belgrade, full of young boys and girls on a Saturday night, wearing

³⁸ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

³⁹ Interview with Nađa, 27 November 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview with Dunja, 4 December 2009.

the same shoes, the same jackets as kids in New York or Paris. Now I know some of them are criminals, and some of their parents starve in order to make them look like that.”⁴¹

Clearly, the experiences of youth during the bombing, as described by the respondents for this project, a carefree and exciting were not viewed similarly by all. From the outset, it has been a goal of this project to understand the ways in which the narratives of youth are unique in capturing the influence of this period on those who came of age during it. These issues of experience and perception are at the core of questions surrounding the respondents’ position as adolescence. I shall explore this further later on.

In addition to the issues of the position and perception of respondents, it is also useful to consider the ways in which the NATO bombing may have altered the perceptions of individuals of the Milošević regime. As one young woman described it, “and then all of a sudden when NATO comes and starts doing bad things to you like bombings, you start liking Milošević.”⁴² This sentiment of both resentment of the West and the feeling of a pull toward the regime of the era is echoed by another respondent who openly muses about the goals of the NATO bombing, which she sees as more than merely the ending of the war in Kosovo:

“It’s absurd. You bomb someone to help them. Is there any logic in it? You bomb the people to save them. From what? Those bombs or their government? I have a really bad opinion about it...and I think that NATO had goals in that way, to get rid of Milošević. But, I think that that way of getting those results was not humane at all.”⁴³

This respondent, Ljubica a twenty-six year-old student in Belgrade, emphasizes the degree to which people in Serbia felt no control over the fate of their country. As Tanja clearly

⁴¹ Tešanović, Jasmina. *The Diary of a Political Idiot: Normal Life in Belgrade*. San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 2000.

⁴² Interview with Tanja, 1 December, 2009.

⁴³ Interview with Ljubica, 3 December, 2009.

articulates, the bombing pushed individuals into supporting, or at least no longer actively opposing the regime. This unintended consequence is yet another example of what Sociologist Eric Gordy considered the Milošević regime's "destruction of alternatives."⁴⁴ Ultimately, the experience of the respondents for this project can be understood as both personally positive and politically confusing and upsetting. This dichotomous experience embodies the richness and complexity of experience of adolescence lived in Milošević's Serbia.

On the 5th of October

As with the other aspects of the narrative of the 1990's, the experience and feeling of the so-called "revolution" of the fifth of October 2000, in which Slobodan Milošević was finally forced out of power, and the democratically elected new government was installed. The narratives of this experience were characterized in surprisingly similar terms, with a general recollection of, a period of euphoria, followed by tremendous disappointment.⁴⁵ The same respondent, who had been a coordinating member of the pro-democratic, anti-regime organization *Otpor* (Serbian for "Resistance") described his feelings on that day as, "like falling in love," emphasizing that after the initial excitement faded away and the vastness of the task of rebuilding Serbia set in, his feelings changed. He described this process in metaphor:

"It was something like if you had cancer and you were expecting to die and suddenly one day you woke up and the cancer was gone. And you have all your life in front of you, and you can do whatever you want, you can be free, everything...when that feeling went away, it was like, "Okay, what now? We need to do something." And nothing is happening at all. During the Milošević time there was only the Socialist Party stealing everything...and now in the coalition there are ten parties stealing ten percent of everything each....it was such an ugly situation and I was so disappointed."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gordy, p 15.

⁴⁵ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Many other respondents echo this feeling of disappointment and frustration as well. For those who witnessed the stagnation following the ousting of the previous regime, the lack of changes many of their hopes for a new era in Serbia were doused, leaving them with the feeling that it was a great farce.⁴⁷ One respondent articulates her understanding of the genesis of the high expectations and eventual disappointment as follows:

“...that day that everyone wanted so much, and it was symbolic because on that day it was the end of the era of our president Milošević...but maybe people wanted too much from that move. You can’t change it that way. It goes like that only in movies. You can’t change your life in one night, especially when we speak about the social structure, of building basics and after this other things go.”⁴⁸

This sober view of the challenges associated with dramatic regime change comes from Mira, a thirty-three year old PhD candidate in Sociology. Her background in the social sciences leaves her in a unique position to analyze the forces at work from a sociological perspective. The degree to which she analyzes the intricacies of social structure and change, are directly related to her educational level, and because she is so highly educated, her view may not be taken as representative. Despite this Mira’s analysis is useful in articulating the challenge of revolution and change.

Mira’s views may be contrasted with other respondents who asserted that they voted and a change was brought about, a meaningful change, or that, “On the 5th of October things got better for a moment.”⁴⁹ According to these people things are getting better. There are totally different values today.⁵⁰ They see their country as heading towards a more progressive and pro-

⁴⁷ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁴⁸ Interview with Svetlana, aged 33 from Belgrade, in Belgrade 30 November, 2009

⁴⁹ Interview with Senka, 1 December 2009.

⁵⁰ Interview with Dragan, 1 December 2009.

western agenda. However, these views are in the minority, as many still believe that they had ten years to figure it out, and they didn't do anything about it.⁵¹ This feeling stems from a general dissatisfaction with many issues in contemporary Serbia and how they are related to the events of the recent past. Ultimately, those who were young, some of whom were even involved in the mass demonstrations of 1996-97 as well as the events of October fifth 2000, find themselves frustrated, with what often feels, to them, like the glacial pace of social change, political reform, and national transformation.

On Zoran Đinđić

For the participants in this study, that key event in the assassination of the Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. I will explore respondents' appraisal of him in the proceeding section. Respondents' characterizations of the late politician were overwhelmingly positive. One young man called the deceased premier his personal idol.⁵² Another mused that he, "was a visionary and that is why he is dead now."⁵³ He was characterized in overwhelmingly positive terms; the descriptions of him were peppered with words like "tough and honest," "great," and "capable."⁵⁴ In terms of his actual policy and work Đinđić's legacy is generally seen by respondents as one of radical changes, and dramatic moves towards democracy. Dunja, a thirty year old from Belgrade, attributed his assassination to the fact that, "he was too fast for Serbia."⁵⁵ Another glowing review of Đinđić's work emphasizes his approach to tackling corruption and criminalization:

⁵¹ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁵² Interview with Dragan, 3 December 2009.

⁵³ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

⁵⁴ Interviews with Senka, Miloš, and Boban.

⁵⁵ Interview with Dunja, 4 December 2009.

“I would describe him as a very, very great man...a step forward for Serbia...very capable...he wanted real changes...to do something about tycoons and all that is bad for one normal democratic country...He did so much good...”⁵⁶

Many respondents also consider Đinđić’s assassination to be a major turning point in Serbia’s political landscape. For many, his death signaled the death of an entire political movement. One respondent asserted the sense of hopelessness with which he was left following the murder as follows: “when he was killed, it was the only moment that I personally thought about leaving this country.”⁵⁷ For people who admired the late prime minister’s attempts at reform and change, his death highlighted just how difficult the desired democratic reforms would be. Another respondent, who was a university student in Belgrade at the time of the assassination, described the experience as a slap, and a great shock.⁵⁸ For many, the moment of their Prime Minister’s killing was the moment in which the challenges to come became stunningly real, leaving many with a sense of hopelessness and frustration.

It is also important to acknowledge the role of martyrdom in interpretations of Đinđić’s legacy. During his tenure as Prime Minister, he did not enjoy widespread support; rather he fought to maintain his party’s status outside of the margins of Serbian political life. It was only after his assassination that he became the icon of hope and democracy he is characterized as. As one respondent admitted, “Đinđić was misunderstood and people only got him later.”⁵⁹ Most participants for this project did not emphasize this issue of retrospect when characterizing their memories of Đinđić. This may be attributed to the fact that many of them were young at the time, and already supporters of democratic movements and parties prior to his death. However,

⁵⁶ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁵⁷ Interview with Dragan, 3 December 2009.

⁵⁸ Interview with Dunja, 4 December 2009.

⁵⁹ Interview with Dunja 4 December 2009.

it is entirely possible that this lack of recognition is also linked to the problems of memory and retrospect in general. Whichever explanation the reader finds more salient, it is also important to note that not everyone in Serbia or even in this study reflects upon the memory of Zoran Đinđić so positively.

The positive comments about, “the only figure in Serbia ever that people ever identified with”⁶⁰ are strikingly similar to those of the International Crisis Group and other western pro-democratic organizations. One respondent openly told me that she, “can assume that you are from the West looking of Đinđić who is really democratic...”⁶¹ This analysis of the representation of the late prime minister as pro-western and of a particular political agenda is also echoed by those who did not view Đinđić’s legacy positively.

Of the thirteen individuals with whom I spoke for this project, only two provided explicitly negative commentary on the late prime minister. Ljubica, the young woman who characterized the love of Đinđić as a western phenomenon, also described his platform in a less positive light. She recalled:

“...some things about him, that from my point of view didn’t look that positive... okay, we were in the need to change something and to change it really radically. But, the direction we took that Đinđić made, from my point of view, very hypocritical.”⁶²

This frustration is also mirrored by Jagoda, a twenty-eight year old high school graduate and mother of two children aged nine and six, from Kruševac. When I asked about Đinđić’s legacy, she spoke only of disappointment and dissolution. She described the results of his and his followers’ platform in negative terms:

⁶⁰ Interview with Tanja, 1 December 2009.

⁶¹ Interview with Lubica, 3 December 2009.

⁶² Ibid.

“...nine years ago, when they came to power, they came with words of progress, with words of having jobs, with words of better times. But nine years have passed and not a third of that is in place. In that way I mean that it is a lie.”⁶³

These narratives are particularly useful because of the diversity they provide to the data included in this paper. It is especially important to note that although these respondents felt differently from the majority in terms of issues of late Prime Minister Đinđić, their narratives of life in the 1990’s were similar, in not identical in some places, to the narratives of their contemporaries.

Issues of Memory and Retrospect

As with any project concerned with confronting and retelling narratives of the past, this project faces certain limitations of memory and perspective. Chiefly, the position of respondents as youths at the time of the events they describe leaves the issue a paramount limitation to this study. Because I asked respondents to characterize their past and describe for me vivid memories, the problem of retrospect and narrative inherent in this type of work emerges. Many subjects explicitly described their troubles recollecting specific details of events. As Jelena, the young woman who sold cigarettes in Kruševac, admitted that she, “can’t remember the exact date that the war broke out in Slovenia. Or whatever they called it, “conflict.” She later muses that, “maybe, one suppresses those memories.”⁶⁴ This is a crucial challenge in obtaining accurate memories and narratives for any research of the past.

Because of these challenges, I was concerned with the authenticity of the narratives from the outset of this project. I was primarily apprehensive of the fact that the questions I would ask might cause respondents to recall memories that would be painful or difficult to discuss.

⁶³ Interview with Jagoda, 26 November 2009.

⁶⁴ Interview with Jelena, 24 November 2009.

Additionally, I was concerned that new or inauthentic details of analyses might creep into the data if I were to prompt a respondent to consider narratives upon which she had not ruminated prior. Ultimately, I found that respondents were aware of the nature of their retrospective influence upon their memories. This problem of retrospect and recollection had a far smaller impact on the narratives than I had worried it would. Upon analyzing the data, it became clear that other aspects of the position of respondents were more influential in shaping the narratives they provided.

On Position and Perception as Children

Perhaps one of the most uniform tendencies throughout all thirteen interviews, was the manner in which life in Serbia prior to 1991 was characterized. The descriptions of the experience of childhood in 1980's Serbia by those who came of age during the Milošević regime was conveyed a sense of tranquility and positivity. Phrases characterizing life in Yugoslavia's end years as, "like living in fairy tale...like being on drugs."⁶⁵ This feeling of general well being and safety, particularly of, "a carefree childhood,"⁶⁶ in the context of, "a very, very light time,"⁶⁷ can be understood as both a child's understanding of her surroundings. As Vuk, a currently unemployed male aged twenty-nine from Kruševac pondered, "What does a kid that age know? Everything was fine to me. No politics or crisis." In this view, the economic and political calamities of post-Tito Yugoslavia still occurred, however as a child, Vuk found himself to be impervious to these problems. Boban, a college-educated male, aged thirty-three from Niš who asserted, "We had a very good life we didn't want to see that it was falling apart", also echoed

⁶⁵ Interview with Boban, 4 December, 2009.

⁶⁶ Interview with Jelena, 20 November 2009.

⁶⁷ Interview with Vuk, aged 30 from Kruševac, in Kruševac, 27 November 2009

these sentiments.⁶⁸ Both young men recognize the degree to which the situation in which they were living was far more complex than that which was visible to them. One respondent characterized this influence of age upon the comprehension of the struggles of the 1990's is characterized as, "having to do with maturity, and age."⁶⁹

Similar to this recognition of the limited perception of childhood was the respondents overwhelming tendency to describe the ways in which their parents and families attempted to insulate them from the conditions of the 1990's. Of the thirteen individuals with whom I spoke, nine made reference explicitly to the efforts of family to shelter or protect them during the times of greatest hardship. One woman, to whom I will refer to as Senka, aged twenty-nine from Novi Sad, with a Master's Degree in Marketing, characterized her experiences as, "not a tragedy for me."⁷⁰ Instead, the stresses of the hardships of daily life in Serbia during sanctions, hyperinflation, the authoritarian Milošević regime, and the NATO bombings is characterized by participants as "sheltered," and "protected." As with the issues of retrospect and memory, that the participants in this study were youths at the time of the events is the key axis of inquiry for this paper. That these people came of age under this influence of a chaotic and painful environment positions them to provide unique analysis of the events chronicled above. Through a better and more detailed understanding of this recent past, one can better contextualize these same respondents perceptions of current events in Serbia.

Current Events

⁶⁸ Interview with Boban, 4 December, 2009.

⁶⁹ Interview with Jasna, 30 November 2009.

⁷⁰ Interview with Senka, 1 December 2009.

In addition to the narratives of the past, my project seeks to understand perceptions of current issues. The goal of this dual exploration is to understand the connections between coming of age in the context of Milošević's Serbia and how one perceives that society now as it begins to transition. During these inquiries four significant themes emerged throughout the interviews: Serbia's process of integration with the European Union, corruption, social and political complacency, and what respondents perceived as the major challenges for Serbia at the present moment. While each of these topics is certainly interrelated, it is important to understand and analyze these issues individually because of the frequency with which they were mentioned, and the tremendous detail with which respondents characterized them.

On the European Union

Perceptions of the European Union and Serbia's current bid to join that association were fairly similar in narrative. As with descriptions of the past, several respondents used identical words and phrases to characterize their opinions on the topic. Generally, respondents believed that Serbia's bid to join the EU is a positive move, citing the material benefits such a move would generate for their country. In particular the economic benefits of a partnership with Western Europe were cited as the paramount rationale for Serbia's eventual membership.

Each of the thirteen respondents included in this study articulated the importance of the major economic changes that would accompany Serbia's membership in the EU. They described "opportunity," "a better life," "a decent life," "a normal life," "a healthier life," as the primary benefits for Serbia through EU membership.⁷¹ These conceptions of "normal," "decent," and "healthy" are all directly tied to notions of European living, rather than to the lifestyles currently

⁷¹ Interview with Jagoda, 20 November 2009.

prevalent in Serbia and other less developed countries. One respondent characterized Serbia and what he perceives as the countries pervasive corruption as, “less culturally evolved...like the Middle East or Africa.”⁷² Comments like the preceding emphasize the ways in which joining the European Union is deeply connected to notions of desirable living standards cultural values. Ultimately, this process of European integration is part of the building of a European identity for those who came of age during the Milošević regime.

For those who grew up in a small, isolated, and limited Serbia, “European means possibilities,” both economically and socially.⁷³ Integration with a larger market, moving to a more valuable currency, and finally finding itself strongly aligned with a major economic force. Those changes would enable young Serbians to earn larger salaries in the west, eventually increasing living standards in their own country. For many, this economic incentive is enough to encourage them to support EU integration. Integration would make it easier for young people to “feel EU (though) it’s hard to feel EU (in Serbia).”⁷⁴ As another young woman admitted, “I live in Europe, last time I checked, although one does not feel like that.”⁷⁵ Feeling EU would mean feeling wealthy, democratic, and stable. It is the embodiment of what Boban from Niš calls, “just a normal, ordinary, life,” with daily routines like public transit regular and redundant.

This desire for “ordinary life” as achieved through Serbia’s integration with European Union speaks volumes about young members of Serbian society’s perceptions of normal. Rather than assert that a unique Balkan, or non-western identity is the desirable norm, all of these respondents, described a life closer to that of citizens of places like Norway, Germany, or the

⁷² Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Interview with Sanka, 1 December 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview with Jelena, 19 November 2009.

Netherlands. To them, the guarantee of employment stability, political redundancy, a strong, yet democratic state, and a flourishing free market embody their dreams of a future of and EU Member Serbia. As one participant explained: “I would like to live like Sweden, no one cares who is the president there, they don’t need to.”⁷⁶ To those who spent their youths engaged in activism and rebellion amidst social, economic, and political decay, the prospect of entry into a community of stable, wealthy nations is a promising one.

On Corruption

An important area of focus for several respondents to this project concerned corruption and criminal behavior. For those who chose to focus upon these issues, much of the illicit activity that took place during the 1990’s such as smuggling and black market activity, are still highly prevalent in Serbian society. Many of these individuals see little change in this area in the past nine years. When I prompted one respondent about what the phrase “black market” meant to her, she replied, “It is still here.” For her, the illicit trade and transport of goods still plays a major role in daily life, in terms of pirated films and music, stolen merchandise, and as she further described, “corruption out in the open.”⁷⁷ In her view the lack of enforcement against this behavior allows it to continue, furthering what she considers to be a major obstacle to Serbia’s integration into the European Union and international community.

Frustration with corruption was also a topic of almost exhaustive discussion for Miloš, a twenty-three year old student in Belgrade, who describes his experiences with bribery below:

“You can have this normal life, while there are always these criminals. In our country, they call them ‘Businessmen...It’s just

⁷⁶ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

⁷⁷ Interview with Senka, 1 December 2009.

like that clerk expects for me to go there and give him a bribe... You can lower the rate of bribery. I mean in my country now, I think it's at 100%. We can't do worse than this...If you know a guy who knows a guy, you can have a job."⁷⁸

For Miloš, daily life is often peppered with encounters with corruption and bribery. He further enumerates one experience in which he was confronted by a police officer on the streets of Belgrade:

“Once, I just walked down the street and a policeman stopped me for no reason and he asked for my ID. I gave him my ID...And then he just...talked to the central station...I have no record of criminal or what so ever. He asked me, “What are you doing here in the city?” And I said, “I am a student, I am doing my studies here....” A few months later there was a letter from a judge...I was accused by our legal system that I am some sort of criminal and that I don't have a work permit or something like that. And the policeman put in his report that I said to him that I am a working man with no permits and something like that...And I had to pay some fines and I did nothing.”⁷⁹

This frustration with the culture of bribery, corruption, and nepotism can be interpreted as a part of what many respondents characterized as the general tendency of people in Serbia to err towards complacency. For those who feel trapped into practicing bribery and corruption, the issue of a general attitude of complacency is of great importance. The ways in which these two issues are interconnected will be explored further.

On The Greatest Challenges

Following these in-depth and detailed conversations with respondents, I asked each one what they viewed as the biggest problem facing contemporary Serbia. Unlike the previous topics, respondents had unique and widely differing perspectives on the issue. The problems

⁷⁸ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁷⁹ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

respondents chose to explore included corruption, infrastructure, territorial integrity, economic challenges, and dealing with the past. Though each respondent viewed the key problems in Serbia as different, there was consensus in terms of how they viewed these problems effect on Serbia's development and movement towards European integration. I feel the most important of these narratives are those concerning corruption and dealing with the past, as they are most interconnected with the general themes emergent throughout the other interviews. These specific respondents' narratives also warrant in-depth analysis because of the detail in which these participants described them.

Two different respondents listed the culture of bribery and corruption as the biggest challenge present in contemporary Serbia. When characterizing political culture one respondent mused, "at the same time the politician gets on top the first thing he does is steal. And it's the same with the bribes. You cannot root that out because that's in the people."⁸⁰ Another participant from Niš, who characterized it in terms of the following parable, re articulated this sentiment: "In Serbia we say, "If you can't buy it with money, you can buy it with lot's of money."⁸¹ For Boban, corruption is not merely a problem in his society, but a way of life commonly practiced and accepted by those around him. As he characterizes it, corruption is not a small problem that can be remedied through investment of public awareness. Rather it is, in this view, a routine aspect of daily life in Serbia, and one to which people are resigned and unwilling to change.

For one respondent, the struggles of dealing with the past and openly discussing the events of the wars of the 1990's were a major point of contention. Sanka, a twenty-nine year

⁸⁰ Interview with Miloš, December 2009.

⁸¹ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

old involved in the NGO community with a Master's degree, characterized the ways in which complacency and a lack of engagement on issues of the past hold Serbia back in its attempts at EU integrations. She describes Serbia as a place where, "War criminals are portrayed as "national heroes," and people, "do not speak about Vukovar and Srebrenica,"⁸² Reconciling the past is of such importance for Sanka, because it may enable Serbia to build a new legacy in opposition to the crimes of the past. That Sanka was the only respondent to emphasize the need for Serbia to face its recent past was somewhat surprising, considering the number of NGO's, and authors who call for such a movement. The relative lack of attention to which individual respondents paid to it verifies Sanka's sentiment that the topic remains a taboo in for many in Serbia today.

Though the specific issues enumerated by respondents as the major challenges for Serbia differ in content, they are connected to one another by their relationship to complacency. Chiefly, the participants in this project emphasize the degree to which people choose to further corruption and denial of the past.

On Complacency

The dominant thread throughout each of the interviews conducted for this project was a general frustration with what participants viewed as complacency among their fellow citizens of Serbia. Another area of frustration for many respondents in this project was that of what they perceive as the general complacency of those around them in furthering the current structures in Serbian society. Participants described an environment in which, "...and everybody keeps still.

⁸² Interview with Sanka, 1 December 2009. The massacre at Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina is considered the worst act of genocide in Europe since the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War. This massacre took place on 11 July, 1995, in which at least eight thousand Muslim men and boys were murdered by the Bosnian Serb army without provocation. This incident is often cited as a paramount example of so-called "ethnic cleansing."

They just stay silent about it. They do nothing and that's it."⁸³ This sentiment is echoed by other respondents who describe their counterparts in Serbia as, "lazy students," who "are not used to working hard,"⁸⁴ "robots or zombies,"⁸⁵ and people who "didn't learn how to be critical."⁸⁶ Several participants characterize this behavior in terms of the metaphor of consumerism, describing the narratives made available in media as a "story" that, "some people are quite happy to buy."⁸⁷

When I prompted respondents as to how they believe this situation of apathy could best be remedied, the responses I received ran the gamut from angry, to passionate, to unsure. When describing recent accusations of embezzlement against a government minister, one respondent suggested that people, "get pitchforks and torches and burn down the government."⁸⁸ While this suggesting is clearly metaphorical, and emphasizes the need for a drastic change in how citizens participate in government, it does articulate the frustrated sentiments of people who would like to change their society.

Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect to these accounts and interpretations is the fact that every respondent referenced in some way, the complacency of those around them without implicating themselves. If this mass psychosis is truly the state of Serbia, then the respondents to this study are not a representative sampling of contemporary society. Logically, it is not possible that everyone else in Serbia is apathetic, yet these thirteen individuals are not. This problem harkens to the paradox of social structure and the tension between individual agency and

⁸³ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

⁸⁴ Interview with Jasna, 24 November 2009.

⁸⁵ Interview with Boban, 4 December 2009.

⁸⁶ Interview with Dunja, 4 December, 2009.

⁸⁷ Interview with Jelena, 24 November 2009.

⁸⁸ Interview with Miloš, 3 December 2009.

collective actions. Within these discussions of complacency, a major sociological concept is touched upon, even in inadvertently. This paradox leaves one to grapple with one of the key limitations to this study: can thirteen individual narratives be seen as representative? While these problems of representation may never be entirely attainable, these narratives do help to clarify what young people view as the role of complacency in the slow progress of Serbia's social change.

Contrasting Narratives of Refugees

The most interesting and divergent set of narratives I encountered during this study were two descriptions of life in Serbia as a refugee from Croatia. I had not originally set out to encounter narratives of refugees; rather I happened to meet these individuals through the connections I made during the study. Because the two women involved dedicated significant time in our interviews to relaying their experiences as refugees and because their analyses of contemporary Serbia are extremely different, it is useful to better understand this contrast. In order to understand these women and their ideas, I will first present the basic facts of their forced immigration and integration into Serbian society.

The first respondent is Tanja, aged twenty-nine and living in Novi Sad. Tanja was born and lived in Vukovar until the Yugoslav army began its siege of the town in August of 1991. At that time, she was on vacation with her family in the south of Serbia, visiting family. Because of the outbreak of war, Tanja and her family were forced to remain in Serbia (at that time, still Yugoslavia). She describes this experience below:

“Well, we didn't know that the war would start and we didn't anticipate it at all. So we basically just packed like one little bag and went to my grandmother's in the South of Serbia and we just came for holidays like two weeks and then the war started and we had to stay there. And so it was

really inconvenient being somewhere and not being able to go back. So we just started to like with like one outfit, that's it, we didn't have anything with us like money. So we stayed there for two months and that was it.”⁸⁹

Tanja's family initially came to Serbia out of their own will, rather than because of forced eviction or fear of violence. This is a significant distinction from the experience of those who fled for their lives in the wake of Operation Storm in Republika Srpska Krajina, or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, Tanja's experience also differs greatly from those who lived in Vukovar during the three-month long siege. Despite these tremendous differences in origin, Tanja's refugee experiences once she arrived in Serbia were similar to other refugee narratives. Below she describes her living conditions during that period:

“Well we heard that many people from Vukovar came here, to Novi Sad. But when we first came here, to Serbia, we had many family members who accepted us for just one or two weeks, so we were going around Serbia with whoever would accept us. We would just stay for one week or two weeks. We tried not to bother them or stay for too long...and then we realized that Novi Sad, maybe because it is a University town, could be a great opportunity for my father to continue his career for one day when the war finished. And so he just tried to get a job here. I remember that we were just eating eggs. Like day after day and nothing else because we didn't have money to buy anything else. And I remember a situation like living that for half of a year, and then one day, my father was coming home and he brought a coke for us. It was so great for us, to bring a coke after half of a year. So you can imagine how poor we were. And we had these like paper plates, because we did not have money to buy real plates. We were living in a ninety square meters apartment, it was really, really small, and there were thirty people in the apartment. We were sleeping and it was like that all of us were so close together, that if one person turns over, everyone should turn. But we were laughing all the time because we had the belief that we could not do something about it. We were not afraid, at least I wasn't afraid. In this position now, I would be afraid.”⁹⁰

This experience of poverty and hardship in the wake of having been displaced is echoed by another respondent with refugee experience, Ljubica. Ljubica is twenty-six and a student of

⁸⁹ Interview with Tanja, 1 December 2009.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

the social sciences in Belgrade. She was born and lived in Knin (now in the Republic of Croatia), and came to Belgrade in 1995 in the wake of Operation Storm. She details her experiences below:

“...we left Knin in 1995 when (the city) was under siege. So that was the last moment when we really had to leave that place because it was a question of living or dying. And those five years between 1990 and 1995 were continuously in war, and before 90 was a happy time. So the war began in my memory let’s say in 1990 or 89. Before that my memories are everything nice, good, and happy. We used to go to the house at the sea, which is in Croatian territory, and after 90 we couldn’t go any more there, because, as you know, that’s where the BLOKADA, it was a blockade of every road to Croatia, and you couldn’t go to leave your country. I was just praying for that chaos to stop.”⁹¹

Unlike, Tanja, Ljubica came to Serbia out of desperation in fear of extreme violence. Where as Tanja’s family had coincidentally been away from their town and unable to return, Ljubica and her family were forced from their home and left with no alternative but to turn to family connections in Belgrade for survival:

“After we left Knin, we went to Belgrade. And, we had the opportunity to live in a house of my uncle, who lived in Paris, so his apartment was empty. This was because we came to Belgrade with nothing. We lost everything we had, and we had a lot. We brought nothing. But, really, if you can imagine, my mother brought with her, two blankets. And we really were hoping that we would stay there. That we would not have to leave the place. It was as I said, a matter of life or death. When we came here, we really were in shock, because everything was new. But, not new in the matter of people and place. That was not so important as the fact that we had to start from scratch. I said that we had that opportunity, we had that apartment. But, most of my cousins and family didn’t have the opportunity. They were placed in centers for refugees, and that was really, really awful and stressful. And those people who lived in those kinds of places had really hard consequences of that kind of life. To live in a room with a million others and you can’t go normally to the bathroom, just nothing. And to live that for years is just really hard. And before that you lived like every normal person.”⁹²

⁹¹ Interview with Ljubica, 3 December 2009.

⁹² Ibid.

Again, the two narratives differ in terms of their content, Ljubica was able to survive and live a more typical life because of the home provided for her family by her uncle. This experience is almost opposite to Tanja's experience of a vagabond lifestyle until her father was able to find employment. Interestingly, Ljubica's account of the poverty and hardship in which her friends lived is very similar to Tanja's description of her family's first apartment in Novi Sad. Though the two respondents came to Serbia four years apart and settled in different regions of Serbia, many details of their stories comply with one another.

Where the data from these two interviews differs most greatly is in their opinions and perspectives on current issues and events in Serbia. In particular, when I asked about what each woman perceives as the greatest problem facing Serbia today, each had a radically different reply. Ljubica's response centered upon territorial integrity and the Kosovo problem:

“Well, I think that for my country, a big challenge and a main challenge is to stay together. Because I have a feeling that the next thing that will happen is the separation of Vojvodina from us...I believe in making people equal...we forgot that when you give more autonomy to some region, you have to figure that in some future that region might seek for separation. So that I think is the main challenge for our country: to maintain the unity and the territory in every meaning... In this regime, we lost Kosovo...And that is one of the things that is a really bad things that can happen to a government, to loose a territory.”⁹³

When I asked the follow up question how she perceived the changes in Serbia since the 5th of October, 2000, Ljubica provided a relatively positive and optimistic narrative, one that was in many ways inconsistent with the view of a majority of the respondents in this survey. Her general characterization of Serbia since those events was one in which, things are getting better...economic aspects are developing...(and) schools...are more connected to the world.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Interview with Ljubica, 3 December 2009.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

This positive view of the contemporary situation in Serbia is also uncharacteristic of the general attitudes of the respondents for this project.

Unlike her counterpart, Tanja characterizes her own view of contemporary Serbia in far more pessimistic terms. She describes herself and her contemporaries as children who, “grew up into people who didn’t expect anything from (their) country.”⁹⁵ Her commentary continues in vein with her describing herself as “really pessimistic,” and “not hopeful.” When I prompted her with the same question, “What do you see as the biggest problem in Serbia today?” her response was, “I don’t see a single thing in Serbia that is completely okay.”⁹⁶ This perception of Serbia as fraught with problems and the lack of general will to solve them, was most certainly in line with the attitudes of other respondents views of complacency in Serbian society. Tanja views the impact of this environment as characterized by the moment when one “...realize(s) that it is your state that is wrong, that is not answering to all of your needs in a proper way.”⁹⁷ This general frustration differs greatly from her counterpart’s characterization. There are many possible explanations as to why these two narratives differ so greatly.

In order to understand the contrasting opinions of these two women, it is important to consider the manner in which both came to Serbia as refugees. I found the dramatic differences in their opinions on cotemporary Serbia rather surprising. In particular, Ljubica’s take on Kosovo as the major challenge for Serbia’s future, was rather unexpected because of how dissimilar her views were from her counterparts. Conversely, Tanja’s pessimism seemed to fit with the general trend I had already encountered to that point. Because of the similarity of

⁹⁵ Interview with Tanja, 1 December 2009.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Tanja's perceptions to others who lack refugee experience, I was left to assume that the refugee experience did not greatly color respondents' opinions of current events. Upon encountering Ljubica's narrative, I was left to believe that the difference on how both of these women came to be refugees was a major influence on how their perceptions of contemporary Serbia developed.

In this analysis, the two major differences in the life experience of these two women are significant in the formation of their ideas. In particular the violent nature of Ljubica's arrival versus the coincidental nature of Tanja's was the major difference between the experiences of these two women. Additionally, that Tanja's family settled in Novi Sad, in the traditionally more tolerant and westernized region of Vojvodina, can be seen as having had a major influence on how she views Serbia and what she considers to be its lack of movement towards European values. In Ljubica's case, having moved to Belgrade and felt immediately secure may have shaped her ideas about the preservation of Serbia's territory. This is particularly redolent when contrasting Tanja's strong identification with Novi Sad and Vojvodina rather than with Serbia. Ultimately, the dramatic differences in the narratives of these two refugee women provide both a dramatic contrast and a forum for a plurality of ideas and opinions. As a primary goal of this project is to provide a forum for less represented narratives of the past, these narratives certainly accomplish this goal.

Discussion and Conclusions

As with any qualitative project, the limitations of a relatively small and narrow sample make it particularly difficult to generalize too broadly from the data in this paper. From the outset of this project it had been my goal to better understand the connections between coming of age in Serbia in the 1990's in the wake of chaos and trauma. Additionally, I had sought to grasp

how those individuals view Serbia's transition process by studying social, political, and economic phenomenon in the country. This indirect approach enabled the respondents to provide vivid details and highly personal stories. Through these narratives I sought to connect past and present within the contemporary moment.

Fascinating as these concepts are, building this understanding was not the exclusive goal I had hoped to obtain; I also hoped to provide a forum for an alternative set of narratives to emerge. Merely providing respondents with the space to voice their opinions, to draw conclusions, and share a part of their lives with an outsider was also a major goal. In many ways, the conclusions one may draw from this work is far more limited than had this project taken place over a more extensive period of time with a greater number of participants.

Despite these limitations, it can certainly be said that major themes, similarities, and threads run through all of the data included in this project. Generally respondents do see their country as in a process of transformation and change. While some view the situation in positive and optimistic terms, a majority do not. Rather, they perceive this change as slow, bureaucratic, and corrupt. The major components of this change include Serbia's eventual integration in the European Union, higher wages and living standards, and an overall greater engagement with global social, educational, and international institutions. For the respondents to this project, these changes would mean material benefits, chiefly affluence for both themselves and for Serbia. This tremendous desire to see these changes reveals the popular conception that a normal life is a European lifestyle or affluence and comfort free of conflict.

For respondents to this project, as well as for young people of pro-European views in general, Zoran Đinđić is seen as a hero, someone worthy of respect and praise. For these

individuals, his death is viewed as a tragedy and a major turning point in Serbia following the 5th of October 2000. The narratives characterizing the late Prime Minister and his work as a “step forward for Serbia,” fit well within the narratives the desire for a more European Serbia. Again, the desire of young people in Serbia to build a wealthier, European Serbia emerges as a key challenge for this and future regimes in the country.

The tremendous hegemony of narratives of the past is also particularly revealing. This was, for me, the greatest surprise that all thirteen interviewees used strikingly similar language to characterize their experiences of sanctions, hyperinflation, generalized poverty, and hardship under the Milošević regime. The stories of each respondent corroborates the stories the others. This hegemony leads one to believe that solid, definitive conclusions can be drawn about some basic facts of life during the 1990's. That the participants come from various regions in Serbia also strengthens the credibility of these narratives, as geographically, the respondents provide an excellent cross-section of Serbian society.

The most surprising aspect of the narratives encountered in this research was the wide array of opinions of what the major challenges are for Serbia. Unlike the descriptions of the past, in which many details and opinions were mirrored in the responses of multiple respondents, this topic elicited very different opinions from each participant. This difference provides a significant challenge to any attempt to generalize the opinions of youth in Serbia. Although the content of the individual opinions on the major challenges in Serbia differs, the overarching theme within each response remains the same: complacency.

What respondents perceived as the lack of social, political, and economic change, is inevitably linked to some sort of collective responsibility. This is generally seen as

complacency, laziness, or as one respondent described it, “greed for a normal life.” Regardless of what respondents felt the challenges for Serbia were, they inevitably landed upon complacency as its root cause. For these frustrated respondents, Serbia is not capable of changes unless individual people chose to engage with their social and political systems. From the perspective of an outsider this problem of frustration appears to warrant greater civic education in schools to foster a greater sense of engagement with the political system. However, the greatest changes in Serbia seem to be possible only when significant numbers of ordinary citizens choose a new government with decidedly pro-European values and policies.⁹⁸ This belief in a general and slow moving progress, allows young people to be optimistic without actively engaging in changing their society, it is in a way a kind of lazy optimism, and a form of resignation. The perspective embodies the experience of ordinary people in Serbia, in particular those who came of age during the 1990’s. Perhaps that is the greatest conclusion that one can draw from this research: almost a decade after the ousting of Slobodan Milošević, the youth of Serbia are still waiting for change.

Recommendations for Further Study

After completing this study, I would certainly given a longer frame of time, explore many additional themes and topics. Had I the resources to travel more fully throughout Serbia, not only to Niš , Novi Sad, and Kruševac , I would have encountered a more diverse cross section of the population. This diversity would include not only those of nationalist perspectives, but also of differing socioeconomic, ethnic, and political backgrounds. In order to find this diversity of opinion and demographic, I would like to incorporate a larger number of participants. Ideally I

⁹⁸ It is interesting, however to consider that the current government, headed by the decidedly pro-European Boris Tadić and the Democratic Party, is not considered by most respondents as an effective agent of the change that they would like to see. One interviewee described him as, “a marionette, with a mild way of behaving.”

would include thirty to forty participants over the course of six months, rather than the thirteen in the three weeks of research included in this study.

Appendix A: List of Interviews

18 November 2009- Jelena, aged twenty-nine from Kruševac , in Belgrade. Teacher of English.

22 of November 2009- Vuk, aged twenty-nine from Kruševac, in Kruševac . Unemployed.

23 of November 2009- Jagoda, aged twenty-eight from Kruševac, in Kruševac. Homemaker.

24 November- Nađa, aged twenty-two from Belgrade, in Belgrade. Student.

30 November 2009- Svetlana aged thirty-three from Belgrade, in Belgrade. PhD Student.

30 November 2009- Viktor aged twenty-seven from Niš , in Belgrade. PhD Student.

1December 2009- Tanja, aged twenty-nine from Vukovar, in Novi Sad. NGO Director.

1 December 2009-Sanka, aged twenty-nine from Novi Sad, in Novi Sad. Marketing Strategist.

1 December 2009-Dragan, aged twenty-three from Belgrade, in Belgrade. Student.

3 December 2009-Ljubica, aged twenty-six from Knin, in Belgrade. Student.

3 December 2009- Miloš, aged twenty-three from Aleksandrovac, in Belgrade. Student.

4 December 2009- Boban, aged thirty-three from Niš, in Niš . News Producer.

4 December 2009- Dunja, aged thirty from Belgrade, in Niš. English Interpreter.

Appendix B: Interview Questions⁹⁹

General/Background:

- ~Can you tell me about yourself? Where you live, who you are, how old you are, what you do?
- ~When were you born, how old are you?
- ~Do you follow current events? If, so what media do you use? Why/why not?
- ~Do you vote? Why/Why not?
- ~Do you feel that your vote counts? Why/why not?
- ~Are you involved in any activism/volunteering? Why/why not? Can you describe it for me?
- ~Have you traveled abroad? Why/why not? Would you like to? Where to? Why or why not?

On the Past:

- ~Where were you living/doing from 1991-2001?
- ~Are there any particular stories or incidents that stand out for you? Can you tell me about them?
- ~Can you describe the living conditions of the 1993-1994 hyperinflation? Both generally and in your specific situation?
- ~Can you describe for me your experience with the shortages from sanctions?
- ~Can you describe the living conditions in the second wave of sanctions? Both generally and in your specific situation?
- ~What would you consider to be the “black market” or “grey economy”?
- ~Does it have an impact in your life? Did it ever?
- ~Can you tell me what you know about and what you remember of the student demonstrations in 1996-1997?
- ~How did you feel to learn that the NATO bombing was going to take place?
- ~Can you describe for me a typical day during the NATO bombing campaign of 1999?
- ~How were you involved in the events of 5, October, 2000?

On the Present:

- ~If you were upset about a certain policy or political issue, do you feel that you could contact someone in government and be heard?

⁹⁹ It is important to note that not all the questions in this appendix were used, as I ultimately employed a semi-structured interview method, however, this questions provide insight into the information I did elicit from each interviewee.

~Can you describe for me what you see as the living standards in Serbia today? Like if you were to describe them to someone who has never been here.

~Would you leave Serbia if you could? Do you want to?

~Where would you like to see Serbia head and is it going in that direction?

~Is the EU a desirable goal for Serbia? Why/why not?

~Do you think that Serbia has changed since 2000? For the better? Why/why not?

~If you could change anything right now what would it be and why?

~What do you most want from of Serbia and why?

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