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# Yugonostalgia: The Pain of the Present

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**Yugonostalgia: The Pain of the Present**

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### ***Abstract***

*This project concerns the concept of nostalgia in the context of Yugoslavia. Through my interviews, observations, and daily interactions, I have sought to present the state of Yugonostalgia in present-day Belgrade. This project looks at Yugonostalgia through three lenses: the past, present, and future. In general, there is positive thinking about the past, a dismal perception of the present, and an optimistic outlook for the future. Despite the fact that many people have these nostalgic stories about the past, Yugonostalgia is still a negative and sometimes offensive term. In this paper, I, the researcher, struggle with my own nostalgia for what I believe would have been a utopian society and with being open and perceptive to other, differing types of nostalgia present in my interviewees.*

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## Why (Yugo)nostalgia?: An Introduction

Ever since I learned about socialism, I have been a subscriber to its beliefs and ideals. The United States, though, is a country that is built upon and depends on a competitive capitalistic society. Perhaps I am sympathetic to socialist ideas because I grew up in that society. I see poverty and corruption in my country, and it often feels as if everyone is constantly striving to get ahead of everyone else. There is not enough cooperation and acknowledgement of other's worth. To me, socialism would mold the perfect society: a society where everyone was equal, and everyone worked not because they needed to in order to survive, but because they knew that it was for the greater good.<sup>1</sup>

In my first year of high school, we were requested to create our own utopias. My utopia, of course, was based on socialism. Now, in my college career, I am taking classes that discuss culture under socialism, and I am learning that it certainly wasn't all sharing and caring. There was tons of propaganda, forced collective farms, forced labor, etc. I find, though, that when I think of previous socialistic societies such as the society of the former Yugoslavia, I only think of the positive things. I think about people's right to travel, available jobs, the high status of the worker, and the pride of the communist youth. I agree, though, with one of my interviewees, Aleksandar<sup>2</sup>, it doesn't seem as if socialism will be possible again in my lifetime.<sup>3</sup> It is something that is past, and I idealize it when I compare it to the present situation today. It seems that I am, in fact, nostalgic.

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<sup>1</sup> Socialism has always interested me, and that, in the opinion of the great, almighty United States is not a good thing. Although I am aware of the fact that there could be intensive research done on the general opinions held within the United States of socialism, this statement is not based on any research that I have done, but on my own perceptions while living there.

<sup>2</sup> All names of interviewees have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> Personal Interview conducted with Aleksandar on 4 December 2009.

This study concerns the manifestation of Yugonostalgia among the people of Belgrade, the once capital of the former Yugoslavia. I was interested in looking at the presence, or lack thereof, of nostalgic memories of these people who underwent this sudden change from being citizens of Yugoslavia to being citizens of Serbia. Has the dramatic transition into a post-socialist country fostered Yugonostalgic feelings among these people?

If not, what about the country today is better than Yugoslavia? What processes are occurring today that are perhaps better than those of Yugoslavia? If so, what are these people nostalgic for? What about Yugoslavia seems so much better than present-day Serbia? As Aleksa Djilas, a Serbian writer, suggests, are they yearning for Yugoslavia “not only because of what it was, but even more so for what it might have been”?<sup>4</sup> Zala Volčič, an author concentrating on Yugonostalgia, points out in her text as well that nostalgia, especially Yugonostalgia, is “less a longing for a real past than a kind of longing for the desires and fantasies that were once possible” before the society changed.<sup>5</sup> People may have had dreams and ambitions that once seemed possible in Yugoslavia, but now, these still unrealized dreams seem absolutely unattainable. There is not the possibility of fulfillment that there once was.

Studying nostalgia, especially Yugonostalgia, is important because of how much can be learned about the present. When people are nostalgic about the past, it says so much more about their present than it does about the past. They know, at some level, that the past can never be achieved again. The past is gone. But, when people are nostalgic,

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<sup>4</sup> Aleksa Djilas. “Funeral Oration for Yugoslavia: An Imaginary Dialogue with Western Friends”, *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea 1918-1992*. ed. Dejan Djokić. London: Hurst & Company, 2003, pg. 332.

<sup>5</sup> Zala Volčič. “Yugo-nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 2007), pg. 27.

they remember pleasant times and happy memories in order, perhaps, to escape from their daily reality of the present. Although memory cannot ever represent the past as it actually happened, it is important to explore why people have chosen to remember what they remember; “it’s very odd sometimes how people have selective memories”.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Yugoslavia, these memories recreate a time when they belonged to an entirely different country. The difference between the former Yugoslavia and present-day Serbia is huge. Nostalgia and holding on to the pleasant memories of Yugoslavia is a way to preserve that period of their lives that was so rapidly taken away.

In my first chapter, “Methodology”, I will discuss the way in which I went about conducting my research. I explain how I chose my interviewees and why I think that this project should be conducted through interviews. I also explore some of the limitations with this project and certain things that I had to be aware of as an outsider as I proceeded with my study.

I then discuss the definition and some thoughts on the theoretical term of ‘nostalgia’ in my chapter, “Some Notes on the ‘Construction of Nostalgia’”. Here, I try to synthesize the theoretical thought that is relevant for my research. There are many different kinds of nostalgia, and, in this section, I give a brief history of the term and define the nostalgias that are present in myself and in my interviewees.

In order to discuss Yugonostalgia, it is imperative to gain a foundation in the history of Yugoslavia. My chapter, “Some Notes on the History of Yugoslavia”, lays out a very brief history of the area with an emphasis on Serbia’s role in it. Entire

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Interview with Miroslav conducted on 7 December 2009.

encyclopedias can be written about the history of Yugoslavia; here, I only have enough space for a brief introduction.

My third chapter, “Importance of Studying Yugonostalgia”, introduces scholarly criticisms of nostalgia and how they play a role in Yugonostalgia in present-day Belgrade. I then introduce my strategy for looking at perceptions of daily life in the past, present, and future. It was important for me to look at my interviewees’ perceptions of three different time periods in order to see if nostalgia is present, and then how it affects their outlook on other time periods.

“Faces of Belgrade” introduces my interviewees. I thought that it was important to give them each an individual introduction because nostalgia itself is a very individualized concept. If someone has nostalgia, they specifically tailor it to themselves. In the end, as Vesna pointed out, “nostalgia is, ultimately, about ourselves and how we were at one time”.<sup>7</sup>

I discuss my interviewees’ perceptions of and memories from the past in “Tito’s Yugoslavia: ‘An excellent country’”. There was a general trend and agreement that their time living in Yugoslavia was better than their time in Serbia now. I use all of their individual stories in order to make some kind of general trend to represent their collective ideas about the past.

I do much the same in my chapter, “Current Situation in the Republic of Serbia: ‘It makes me throw-up’”. No one that I talked to is completely content with the state of his or her life at the present. I was surprised to find that my oldest interviewee, who I had expected would carry the most nostalgia, in fact carries the least and is the most content

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<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

with his life at the present. In general, though, people think that the state cannot go on functioning as it is, and something needs to change.

I discuss their ideas and feelings about change in my chapter, “‘It will be a bumpy ride’: The Future of Belgrade”. Everyone that I talked to is an optimist about the future. They believe that things will eventually get better, even though it will probably take some time. Many believe that positive change is only possible through integration into the European Union. Once again, Serbia will have open borders with the other former republics of Yugoslavia.

In my concluding chapter, I discuss what all of this means. I discuss the negative views that people have of Yugonostalgia and why I think that this is somewhat contrary to their stories and musings on the past. I then try to reconcile the differences between my nostalgia and the nostalgia that I perceive as present in my interviewees. How can the views of Yugonostalgia be changed to make it more acceptable? Is my nostalgia acceptable as an outsider? And, finally, how can we use these nostalgic feelings and musings to create a better future?

I then discuss the limitations of my study, and I make recommendations for further study on this topic. There was certainly a lot that limited me in this study, but the most important limitation was my own nostalgia and personal bias. This research is a direct result of my own nostalgia and my willingness to see nostalgia in others. It would be useful to see what kind of conclusions a researcher with little or no nostalgia of their own would find. Consequently, there are many more directions in which this research could be furthered. I have mentioned a few ideas for further study, but it is, in no way, an exhaustive list.

## **Methodology**

My research is predominately made up of semi-structured interviews. It was important for me to talk to people who actually experienced this transition because nostalgia occurs on personal and individual levels. In order to discover how its intricacies do or do not manifest themselves today, I needed to do research on a personal and individual level. I realize that the people that I have talked to do not represent the entire population of Belgrade by any means. But, I think that it is important to give my interviewees an individual voice instead of generalizing and categorizing them as nostalgic Serbs or not nostalgic Serbs. These interviews are imperative for this research because hearing how people feel about Yugonostalgia is not something that can be read in a book. I made my target population as wide as I could in order to get a lot of different perspectives. I interviewed ex-Yugoslavs in their 60s, 50s, 40s, 30s, and 20s. Does generation affect nostalgia and what they feel nostalgia for? These people certainly had different experiences, but I found that, for the most part, many of their opinions were quite similar. It is important to talk to people of all different ages because even people who were born just before the break-up of Yugoslavia should technically have a Yugoslav passport, and those people probably have something to say about that. As well as age, I tried to interview people from different backgrounds, different walks of life: students, a street vendor, a retiree, and an administrator.

During my research in Belgrade, I had to take into account the fact that these people have been through a lot. And, I, as an outsider, needed to be respectful. I certainly did not want to burden my interviewees with recalling perhaps painful

memories. If my interviewees became uncomfortable at all during the interviews, I would try to end the interview faster.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these interviews, I used observation from what I see in the city myself. This included material objects that project a nostalgic sentiment. Some examples are: street names that commemorate socialist heroes or events, items sold on the street that memorialize the times of Yugoslavia, stores offering goods from the days of Yugoslavia, and bars/restaurants with nostalgic themes. I documented these observations by collecting materials, taking photographs, and keeping a daily journal.

I also made use of daily interactions with people within the community outside of my interviews. By interacting with the people, I tried to gain a better knowledge of what daily life in Belgrade actually entails. I found that people started telling me about Yugoslavia and/or Tito without me even asking or implying interest. Daily interactions also helped me to gauge how people feel about their present lives. I have found that people will tell stories and remembrances from a time that they characterize as better, but they will not call it nostalgia.

### **Some Notes on the “Construction of Nostalgia”<sup>9</sup>**

What exactly is this nostalgia, though? Historically, it has been a very difficult concept to define. The word nostalgia comes from a combination of the Greek words *nostos* (returning home) and *algos* (pain), and it was first used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a medical term. It described the physical manifestations of the homesickness of seamen

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<sup>8</sup> I made sure that they all agreed to the interview being recorded, and I told them about my project and the research that I am using the interviews for.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw. “The Dimensions of Nostalgia”, *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*. Manchester: University Press, 1989, pg. 3.

and travelers.<sup>10</sup> The term did not enter the field of social studies until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it began to be used to describe people's longing for a time in the past. Thus, it is a fairly new concept.

According to Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, editors and contributors for an encompassing text on theoretical thought on nostalgia, there are three conditions that need to be met in order for nostalgia to be present. The first condition is that the individual in question needs to see time as linear. The past is the past, and there is no way that that past can happen again. There is no possibility for time to be cyclical and return to the way things were in the past. Then, this individual needs to have the sense that the "present is deficient";<sup>11</sup> they are not happy or satisfied with their current way of life. The third condition is the presence of material objects from the past. These objects or buildings facilitate the construction of nostalgia.<sup>12</sup>

Svetlana Boym, probably the most important author writing on nostalgia both theoretically and in post-socialist countries, divides the concept of nostalgia into two categories: restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia focuses on *nostos*, returning home. This is when there is an attempt to restore the past and the way it was before. Reflective nostalgia, though, is centered on *algos*, the pain and longing of the nostalgia. There is no attempt to restore the past, but, instead, there is somewhat of a dwelling on their feeling of remembrance.<sup>13</sup>

Mitja Velikonja, an author focusing on the concept of Yugonostalgia, divides nostalgia even further into feeling/idea nostalgia and materialized nostalgia. Feeling/idea

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<sup>10</sup> Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> Chase and Shaw, "The Dimensions of Nostalgia", pg. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pgs. 2-4.

<sup>13</sup> Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Introduction chapter.

nostalgia is the nostalgia that is present in individuals and in their collective and individual memories of the past. Materialized nostalgia is present through material objects such as monuments, buildings, and souvenirs. There are so many objects that are somewhat ironically sold in today's capitalist economy to fulfill the nostalgia for socialist times.

All over the former Yugoslavia, there are relics left both intentionally and unintentionally displaying quite openly the socialist past of the former republics. In Belgrade, these remnants can be found everywhere. The city's football teams play a large role in the life of the city through the apparel of the fans, their graffiti, and the occasional violence committed by their associated group

of hooligans. Even though Serbia is now its own

democratic nation, these football teams have socialist

names: Partizan and Red Star. A Partizan was a communist fighter who fought for

communist ideals during WWII against the Nazis. The red star is a symbol of

communism and socialism. It originated during the Russian civil war of 1917, and later,



Logos for FK Red Star and FK Partizan



many communist countries adopted it for their flag or as

an important symbol. It had a central space on the flag

of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The

importance of the red star as a symbol can be seen in

these football teams' logos, for it features prominently

on both. On stands along the street, one can buy a mug

with Tito's face on it right next to a Serbian army cap. New stores can be seen with

socialist logos, such as Novecento, a shoe store. Tito's House of Flowers is an excellent

example of materialized nostalgia. It is a building where ex-Yugoslavs can fulfill their nostalgia by visiting their fallen Comrade.

Many of these examples of materialized nostalgia seem somewhat ironic today. The socialist names of the football teams seem contradictory to the beliefs of the majority of their supporters. Many of the fans are, in fact, nationalists. From many street vendors, one can buy a small bust of Tito as well as a Serbian flag and a necklace carrying the Serbian Orthodox cross. The beliefs behind each object are completely different. Tito stood for “Brotherhood and Unity” among all of the south Slavs in Yugoslavia, the Serbian flag stands for the new, democratic Republic of Serbia, and the Serbian Orthodox cross represents a religion that is, at its roots, completely Serbian. How would Tito feel if he knew that his likeness was being sold next to objects that contradicted his beliefs? Another ironic manifestation of this materialized nostalgia is the example of Novecento, the shoe store. What about the red star with the hammer and sickle on it says, “Come here to buy your next favorite pair of fashionable boots?” It seems completely contradictory to me. The last thing that the hammer and sickle should be used to advertise is a capitalistic store for consumers to spend their money in.

Nostalgia, whether restorative, reflective, idea/feeling, or materialized, is not the longing for a real past *per se*. It is impossible for a memory to represent an event exactly as it happened. That is the nature of memories. For example, let’s say I am recounting the moment I met a colleague. I am sure that I shook her hand, but when I think more about it, I realize that I have no idea what kind of handshake the person had. Am I sure that I actually shook her hand, or did I just forget what it felt like? Memories are fleeting and cannot represent reality as it actually happened. A person will intentionally or

unintentionally make minor adjustments to their memory, which takes away the reliability of the memory as presenting fact. This is made even more difficult by the fact that everyone will remember one specific thing differently. No one person will have played the same exact role in a happening, and each one will have a different perspective and make different alterations. Thus, nostalgia is the longing for an imagined past: something that never actually existed. As Chase and Shaw point out, “the counterpart to the imagined future [utopia] is the imagined past [nostalgia]”.<sup>14</sup> The times that are imagined in both did/will never actually exist. Even nostalgics have trouble identifying what exactly they feel nostalgic for. It may seem like they are pining for a specific place, but, they are, in fact, longing for a specific time, usually the time of their childhood.<sup>15</sup> But, as Vesna pointed out, everyone is nostalgic for the time of his or her childhood.<sup>16</sup> It just so happens, though, that the fall of Yugoslavia perfectly coincided with the end of Vesna’s childhood. Any nostalgia she has for that time period can be categorized as nostalgia for her childhood. But, what about people who began and ended their childhood in Yugoslavia? What about people who had just barely begun their childhood when it fell?

As Mitja Velikonja points out in her *Titostalgia* text, a person does not necessarily have to have lived through or experienced a specific time period in order to be nostalgic for it. This is because the “past for which nostalgics long never existed as such – theirs is a longing for something that never was”.<sup>17</sup> This makes it possible for people born in the last years of Yugoslavia to carry some nostalgia for it, even though they never really

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<sup>14</sup> Chase and Shaw. “The Dimensions of Nostalgia”, pg. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*, introduction chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Mitja Velikonja. *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2008, pg. 30.

consciously experienced it. They can be nostalgic for a past that they have heard stories about or one that they create for themselves.

### **Some Notes on the History of Yugoslavia**

During the years of Yugoslavia, “Brotherhood and Unity” was the ideology of the day, and Belgrade was its capital. Yugoslavia consisted of six republics (Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Montenegro) and two autonomous regions within Serbia (Vojvodina and Kosovo). The Yugoslav passport allowed Yugoslavs to travel anywhere. Of course they could travel all over Yugoslavia itself, but they could also travel all over the world without visas. A Serbian man recounted that once a Swiss man offered him 15,000 Swiss Francs for his passport, but he would never sell it.<sup>18</sup>

Nowadays, one can buy a Yugoslav passport for much less in the various antique stores around the region.

Two people explained to me that the break-up of Yugoslavia was like a divorce. The republics were in a relationship, and they had agreed to stay together. In 1991, though, Slovenia led the way in secession. As our Belgrade tour guide, Vuk, told us, when Slovenia and Croatia left, Serbia was angry because Serbia loved them, and Serbia was going to try and hold on to them as hard as it could. Mirko pointed out that Slovenia and Croatia were like the more advanced, more educated partner of the marriage. They had nothing to really gain from their relationship with Serbia. But, Serbia was practically nothing without them, and that is why so much anger was involved in the break-up.

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<sup>18</sup> Tanja Petrović. “The Territory of the Former Yugoslavia in the Mental Maps of Former Yugoslavs: Nostalgia for Space. *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, Seria Nova, Zeszyt 31, 2007, pgs. 5.

During the wars of the 1990s, inter-ethnic ties were heavily strained. The peoples of Yugoslavia began to move apart from each other. Beginning with the secession of Slovenia in 1991, followed by the declared independence of Croatia and Bosna i Hercegovina, the wars of the break-up of Yugoslavia were the worst that Europe had seen since World War II. Serbia was involved somehow in all of the theaters of the war, but the war was never really fought on Serbian soil. During the 1990s, the UN imposed sanctions on Serbia, and NATO bombed targeted buildings in Belgrade. As a consequence of the wars of the 1990s, there are now seven independent countries that have emerged from one Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosna i Hercegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo/a). And, as proof that the break-up is still not concluded, Serbia has yet to recognize Kosovo/a as a nation.<sup>19</sup>

Nowadays, there is quite a divide between many of the former republics. It's hard to believe that not too long ago, they were all part of the same country. In my travels through the region, I was surprised by how strict the borders are. When you leave one country on the road, you first have to go through their checkpoint. Then, you have to go through another checkpoint of the country that you're entering. Before the wars of the 1990s, one could move freely among the republics without any of these checkpoints.

In the nationalist discourses of the former republics, these new countries have an infinitely better status than they did when they were merely republics.<sup>20</sup> But, Aleksa Djilas, somewhat of a nostalgic, asks, "In what way are the small, poor and democratically deficient states that have taken Yugoslavia's place less artificial and more

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<sup>19</sup> For more on Kosovo/a, see: Tim Judah. *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the nationalist discourses in Serbia, see: Eric Gordy. *The Culture of Power in Serbia*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

modern than it was?”<sup>21</sup> This is a question that I want to explore. Here he admits that Yugoslavia may have not been better than the states now, but they are certainly in no way better than Yugoslavia. So, if Yugoslavia, in fact, was not necessarily better than the present day situation, what do people remember about it? What are their memories associated with Yugoslavia? What was there to be nostalgic about?

As Tanja Petrović, a contemporary researcher of Yugonostalgia, explains in her text “Nostalgia for Space”, ex-Yugoslavs lost a great deal of space when Yugoslavia broke apart. In Yugoslavia, a Serb could easily travel and vacation on the coast, but, now, the coast is no longer too viable an option. Mirko recounted: “during these heavy years of difficult living, it somehow went in the back of the mind of people: losing the seaside. It was too expensive anyhow. It’s not ours; forget about it. But, it was a *very* big loss.”<sup>22</sup> People long for “an identity larger than the ethno-national one, and for a vast imperial space that has shrunk”.<sup>23</sup> I think that this nostalgia for space is quite real for Serbs because, in my opinion, they lost the most in the break-up of Yugoslavia. As Mirko told me, “It’s natural: rich north and poor south. These people from the north don’t want to go down”<sup>24</sup>, but everyone wants to go west to Slovenia and Croatia. Serbia lost all of the benefits that they had from their relationship with Slovenia and Croatia, and today, there is little here to attract a large number of tourists.

Besides space, there are nostalgic stories about Tito, the high status of the worker, popular music and culture, products, and days of one’s youth in Tito’s Pioniri.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Djilas. “Funeral Oration for Yugoslavia”. pg. 328.

<sup>22</sup> Personal Interview with Mirko conducted on 29 November 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Petrović. “Nostalgia for Space”. pg. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Personal Interview with Mirko conducted on 29 November 2009.

<sup>25</sup> See: Velikonja. *Titostalgia*. 2008; Tanja Petrović. “‘When We Were Europe’: Socialist Workers in Serbia and Their Nostalgic Narratives. The Case of the Cable Factory Workers in Jagodina (Serbia)” in

collective memories among the ex-Yugoslavs provide common points for conversation that can somewhat bridge the gap that has risen between them as a consequence of the wars.<sup>26</sup> When discussing Yugoslavia and that period of time with other ex-Yugoslavs, they can enter a kind of safe zone. They can safely discuss a time when they “felt more comfortable, shared values and lived in dignity”,<sup>27</sup> a time when they were united.

### **Importance of Studying Yugonostalgia**

Nostalgia is so much more than a comment on the past. If anything, it says more about the present situation than it does about the past since nostalgia is more about an imagined past than a real one. Often, historical studies and scholarly studies do not explore nostalgia because of its “lack of authenticity”.<sup>28</sup> But, this overlooks the importance of the fact that people have created these ‘inauthentic’ narratives. Nostalgia needs to be explored in order to learn more about the present situation. What about the present situation has inspired these not so accurate representations of the past?

Yugonostalgia is especially important because of the suddenness and harshness of the transition out of Yugoslavia. Yugoslav ideas were marginalized in favor of the nationalistic discourses. Yugonostalgia is a way for ex-Yugoslavs to legitimize their past and memories that have a minimized space in their present-day situation. The right to remember this past is a “right that was taken away from ordinary people for the sake of

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*Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, Maria Todorova (ed.), New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009; Petrović, “Nostalgia for Space”, 2007; Monika Palmberger. “Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future” *Sociologija* No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 2008; Volčič, “Yugo-nostalgia”, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Palmberger. “Nostalgia Matters”. 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Petrović. “Nostalgia for Space”. pg. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Volčič. “Yugo-nostalgia”, pg. 27.

‘national projects’”.<sup>29</sup> People can indulge in nostalgic stories in order to validate that period of their lives that was quite suddenly ended.

I address Yugonostalgia in three separate sections: the past, present, and future. First of all, what about the past are they nostalgic for? What were the conditions that they remember from the past? Are these different from what we can learn in historic literature about Belgrade? Secondly, what do these nostalgic feelings say about present-day Belgrade? What are the conditions today? Are the perceptions of daily life positive? If they are negative, are they more likely to be Yugonostalgic? What is the present opinion of the term ‘Yugonostalgia’? And thirdly, how do these people feel about their future? Is it a bright future? How do their feelings about the past affect their ideas of their future? Does Yugonostalgia affect the way that people think about their futures? Is it a stagnating force, or one driving action?

### **Faces of Belgrade**

In order to get a wide range of opinions, ideas, and memories, my interviewees come from multiple generations and different backgrounds. Mirko represents the oldest generation of my study. Born in Zagreb in 1946, he has been living in Belgrade for about 45 years. He is retired now, living with his wife with whom he has two daughters, and he recently welcomed his first grandson into the world. Mirko lived for 44 years in Yugoslavia.

Aleksandar was born in a small town in Bosna i Hercegovina in 1952. He worked all over Yugoslavia as a radio officer for various shipping companies. Today, he works

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<sup>29</sup> Petrović. “Nostalgia for Space”, pg. 11.

in the park at Kalemegdan selling items from his collection of coins, pins, and medals. Aleksandar lived for 38 years in Yugoslavia.

Vesna was born in 1969 in Sarajevo and moved to Belgrade during the war when she was 22. When she arrived in Serbia, she was a refugee in what she considered her own country. She lived in Greece for five years, and today, she is working at the Faculty for Media and Communications in Belgrade. She lived during the time of Yugoslavia for 21 years.

Miroslav was born in Belgrade in 1977. He is currently a student at the Faculty for Economics here in Belgrade. He has done a fair bit of traveling abroad and even lived in Bangkok for part of his childhood. He lived in Yugoslavia for thirteen years.

Marko and Stefan are both students at the Faculty for Media and Communications in Belgrade. Marko was born and raised in Belgrade, and Stefan is from Kosovo/a. Both lived in Yugoslavia for less than ten years.

### **Tito's Yugoslavia: "An excellent country",<sup>30</sup>**

Despite the differences among the interviewees and the amount of their experiences in Yugoslavia, the general opinion of Tito's Yugoslavia is the same: "We lived in an excellent country".<sup>31</sup> Tito's communist youth, the Pioniri, promoted values for all Yugoslavs to strive for. The name Pionir itself was an acronym for these values: **P**ošten (honest), **I**skren (sincere), **O**dan (loyal), **N**eustrašin (fearless), **I**strajan (persistent), **R**adin (hardworking).<sup>32</sup> These common ideals were part of the communist ideology,

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<sup>30</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

especially honesty.<sup>33</sup> It was quite common for young people to be involved in the Pioniri, but it was not required. According to Mirko and Aleksandar, there wasn't a lot of pressure to join the ranks of the Pioniri, but almost everyone did. Towards the end of Yugoslavia, especially after Tito's death, the Pioniri lost a lot of their meaning. It was just something that children did, and "it didn't have any special meaning to [them]".<sup>34</sup>

In Yugoslavia, everyone could travel around the country and the world. Aleksandar traveled to France, England, the United States, and all over his own country. Mirko did much the same. Vesna and Miroslav even lived abroad for a significant amount of time. Mirko raced cars when he was a student and participated in races all over the former Yugoslavia, and in 1972, he was the national champion. In 1970, when Aleksandar was in London, he met a man on the street who was talking to people about the countries behind the Iron Curtain. He had a map out, and Yugoslavia was marked as behind the Iron Curtain. Aleksandar showed him his red passport, and proudly said, "I'm from Yugoslavia, and it is on the other side of the Iron Curtain."<sup>35</sup> Yugoslavs had the opportunity to travel to countries that were on both sides of this 'line' between East and West.

Because of their non-aligned position and the stability of the country, Yugoslavia was well respected by people from all over the world. During the years of Tito, the country was constantly and consistently developing. In the late 1960s, Tito decided that it was time for the people to gain something from their communist system.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Film: *Crveni Udar*, Predrag Golubović, 1963.

<sup>34</sup> Personal Interview with Miroslav conducted on 7 December 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Unemployment was low, and the people lived in a stable, rich country.<sup>37</sup> Yugoslavia had a good education system, and Aleksandar felt as if everyone was very well informed about the world, and the people of the world respected them for it. One “couldn’t imagine that one day there would be no communist party, that this whole thing would go down.”<sup>38</sup>

Tito led the country as a soft dictator. He knew that the country and its people would be better off if he was not tough. Aleksandar told me: “There was no dissidence.”<sup>39</sup> Marko had an anecdote about a man who declared recently that he was a dissident during Tito’s rule. But, this man was in Belgrade at the time and was allowed to publish all of his papers in the country’s capital. As a dissident, Marko explained, he should have had to go across the border to publish his work, but, under Tito, it was a soft dictatorship. You could say what you wanted to then.<sup>40</sup>

### **Current Situation in the Republic of Serbia: “It makes me throw-up”<sup>41</sup>**

There is a general consensus among the working people who I interviewed that the current state of affairs in Serbia leaves much to be wanted. There is a distrust of the politicians in today’s Serbia. Vesna says, “I can’t find any person [in politics] that I can say, ‘ok, I believe him or her.’”<sup>42</sup> Aleksandar insists that the politicians are incapable of running the country. Milošević was overthrown nine years ago, but Aleksandar asks with

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<sup>37</sup> Personal Interview with Stefan conducted on 1 December 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Personal Interview with Mirko conducted on 29 November 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Personal Interview with Marko conducted on 1 December 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

a sigh, “Where are we after nine years?”<sup>43</sup> Miroslav says that politicians are paying too much attention to foreign policy and whether or not Kosovo/a is a legitimate nation when they should be concerned with the economy and local issues. They feel as if nothing is really working. There is corruption, incompetence, and dishonesty. Mirko feels differently, though. He thinks that the politicians today are doing the best they can for the country and themselves. It just isn’t enough.

Serbia’s economy, though, is even worse than the politicians. Aleksandar says that it is a real crisis. Marko said that it is hard these days for people to buy food for themselves. It is very hard to find a job, especially if you are older than 35, and especially if you are a woman.<sup>44</sup> Serbia needs more foreign loans, but the politicians are receiving the loans just to spend them.<sup>45</sup> There is no more development; nothing has really been built in Belgrade for a while. Miroslav explains “no one is trying to rebuild trust and put the economy back on its feet”.<sup>46</sup>

There is some sort of tangible feeling of helplessness about the current situation. When Aleksandar got agitated while thinking about it, he started to lose his words and became very flustered. He says it’s “too complicated”.<sup>47</sup> Vesna cannot think of how they “can fix or manage the situation”.<sup>48</sup>

### **“It will be a bumpy ride”<sup>49</sup>: The Future of Belgrade**

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<sup>43</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Personal Interview with Miroslav conducted on 7 December 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Personal Interview with Marko conducted on 1 December 2009.

Even though there is a somewhat helpless feeling regarding the present situation, people generally are hopeful about the future. As Vesna described it, she tries to be optimistic and will always find the good in any situation. It is all about what decisions each person makes. If they make the right decisions, they can be happy. She says, “I will be happy because”, she sings in Sinatra style, “I did it my way”<sup>50</sup>. Mirko believes the answer is in European integration. With the integration, there will be no borders again, and people will be able to travel freely. He says that Europe has interest in making Serbia better, and this is what has given him optimism. Nothing can stay the same forever; this is just a “curing period”.<sup>51</sup> Marko says that this integration towards Europe will mean better standards, and it is going to happen faster and faster. “It’s going to be interesting”.<sup>52</sup> Miroslav suggests, in order to always be optimistic, to think that things could always be worse: “Oh, bombs are not falling today? Ok! That’s super!”<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

Yugonostalgia is not something that is seen in a positive light. I have not met anyone who would openly say that they are Yugonostalgic. Marko went as far to say that it is an “offensive term”.<sup>54</sup> But, no one will hesitate to say that life was better during Yugoslavia:

“Nobody had anything against [Croats]. At that time there was good cooperation between the televisions of Belgrade and Zagreb. Films were filmed with combined actors, Serbs and Croats. Nobody had anything against. So I had no major problem.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Personal Interview with Mirko conducted on 29 November 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Personal Interview with Marko conducted on 1 December 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Personal Interview with Miroslav conducted on 7 December 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Personal Interview with Marko conducted on 1 December 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Personal Interview with Mirko conducted on 29 November 2009.

“But, I may say to conclude that it was better. The best years I remember were in the 70s and 80s, not only because I was young at that time. But in the late 60s, Tito said that it was time for people to become fruitful from communism. Tito took many loans from around the world, but he used those loans to build a country.”<sup>56</sup>

“My childhood was during that part of existence of Yugoslavia. And my memories are really good. I was happy. I can’t make a separation between the politics. I can’t analyze. Now, it’s really difficult to analyze that period. I have good memories.”<sup>57</sup>

“Primary school was maybe the best time we had in Belgrade. It was a completely different country; it was safe on the streets, no crime almost at all. And people were sure they wouldn’t lose their jobs. Social security, hospitals, everything was on a higher level than today.”<sup>58</sup>

“I would change the state today with the state then.”<sup>59</sup>

I would categorize all of these statements as Yugonostalgic, but there is something about this term that makes people feel ashamed. It is a pity that this term has been turned into a negative one. People following the nationalist discourses labeled Yugonostalgics as “weak people, unable to adapt to the new circumstances...to make a successful life in the ‘democracies’ that came with the new national states”.<sup>60</sup> This, however, was not the reason my interviewees expressed when asked why Yugonostalgia was a negative term. It is not good to be nostalgic because it is important to not dwell on the past. One should live in the present because there is nothing that can be done about the past. They are “here and now, and what was, was”.<sup>61</sup>

I do not believe that being nostalgic means living in the past, though. As Svetlana Boym argues, nostalgia can be reflective nostalgia that does not seek to go back to the

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<sup>56</sup> Personal Interview with Aleksandar conducted on 4 December 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Personal Interview with Miroslav conducted on 7 December 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Personal Interview with Marko conducted on 1 December 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Petrović, “Nostalgia for Space”, pg. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Personal Interview with Vesna conducted on 27 November 2009.

way it was before. The definition of nostalgia needs to move past the pain and longing (*algos*) of its beginning. Nostalgia is not about the past, but the present. Nostalgia is remembering the past in contrast to and in the context of the present. In the case of Yugonostalgia, the pain is about the present, not about returning to the past.

The people that I talked with realize that Yugoslavia was not a perfect country, that nostalgics long for a time that never actually existed. But, how am I to know what part of their memories is real, and what part is imagined? They may have created a completely unrealistic picture of Yugoslavia for me, or they may not represent the majority of the population, but does it really matter? I think not. Nostalgia is a personal and individual concept. Everyone will have different stories and different feelings about the past. I think the more important observation is the trend of a positive vision of the past, a dismal view of the present, and a positive outlook for the future. These people are not happy with the present, but they have nostalgic stories about the past and they are full of hope for the future.

I found, though, that my nostalgia is different. My nostalgia is for the ideals and the utopia that I believe a socialist society would have been. I find myself attached to the idea of a multi-ethnic country that is united under one ideology. I feel inspired by the idea of the youth relaying a baton around the nation and connecting everyone who sees it pass. My interviewees' nostalgia, though, is "not really about Brotherhood and Unity".<sup>62</sup> It is about a time when the country was stable, respected, and they felt more secure. They remember a time when they could travel freely and education and medical care was free. It is these kinds of things that are lacking today, and this is what needs to change for a

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<sup>62</sup> Personal Interview with Stefan conducted on 1 December 2009.

better future. People need to remember the good things from the past in order to carry them into the present and improve upon them in the future. These things were not taken from Yugoslavia into today's present; instead, everything was erased, and Serbia started from the beginning. For a better future, the good things that people are nostalgic for need to be remembered and held on to, and hopefully, the country will not have to start from the beginning again.

### **Limitations of the Study**

With this research, I sought to understand the concept of Yugonostalgia and its place within the present-day society of Belgrade. My study had to be very limited, though, due to the time constraints. Meaningfully talking to people and analyzing my conversations with them was very time consuming. In order to get an even better idea of Yugonostalgia in Belgrade, I would have talked to hundreds of people to get as many opinions and stories as possible.

I was also limited because of the language barrier. I had to limit my study to those who spoke English. But, what about the people who don't know English? I'm sure many of them would have different stories to tell. The people I interviewed were definitely of a certain educated class. I wonder if a good education plays a role in how nostalgic a person is or how content they are with the present-day situation.

Another limitation that I had in this study was my bias towards socialism. It was often difficult for me to remain neutral while talking to people. When people said that nostalgia was a bad thing, or that Yugonostalgia is an offensive term, I felt like I had to argue with them and prove to them that it isn't. I found myself getting defensive because

I feel nostalgic, and I did not want my interviewees to think any less of me. This is a bias that I certainly did not overcome. I hope that I have portrayed and respected their views correctly while still presenting my own.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

There is definitely a lot more that can be learned from studying Yugonostalgia than what is presented here. The conclusions of this study were a direct result of my biases and my nostalgia. Every study would be different based on the differences and biases of the person conducting it. In order to further study Yugonostalgia, I think it could be helpful to do a wide study or survey of all different kinds and generations of people. *Belgrade Insight*, a newspaper in English, recently published a survey that was conducted to find how people in the Balkans feel about present-day politics and social issues.<sup>63</sup> The surveyors conducted hour-long interviews with people of varying ages. The results were then presented in a statistical format. I think this kind of study would be helpful if it looked into how people feel about the past and future as well. The results could be presented in a statistical format as well as a more in depth one.

Interestingly, the results of the study that was conducted found that Serbs are the most pessimistic people in the Balkans.<sup>64</sup> It would be a fascinating project to explore why that is. Does this pessimism make them, on the whole, more or less nostalgic than other peoples in the Balkans? It would be a huge project, but a study could be conducted to research the varying levels of nostalgia around the former Yugoslavia. What about the former republics' differing situations causes more or less Yugonostalgia? This project

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<sup>63</sup> See Bojana Barlovac, "Serbs the Most Pessimistic in the Balkans", *Belgrade Insight*, Issue No. 54, Friday, December 04 – Thursday, December 17 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

would be a wonderful addition to knowledge about Yugoslavia as a whole and how people of all its former republics perceive that period of their lives.

My research focused on individual feeling or idea nostalgia, but I think another interesting project would be to study the presence of materialized nostalgia in Belgrade, or anywhere else in the former Yugoslavia. Are most of these objects for a foreign or local audience? Is it important for people to hold on to their objects that had a place in Yugoslavia, but seem a bit outdated now? How do people feel about the objects that can be observed in daily life, such as buildings, street names, statues, and stores? Do they think that these things are important or not? Is there any apathy towards these relics?

These ideas certainly do not represent an exhaustive list of new directions where this research could go. These are merely a few suggestions and recommendations. Whether or not any of these recommendations are taken, I truly believe that this is an important topic that begs to be researched further. I think that it is very important in order to learn more about post-socialist and transitional societies in general and, of course, about the people of the former Yugoslavia.

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

*I have organized my interview questions into three parts: past, present, and future. By organizing them this way, I could get a clearer picture of how these three periods of time are perceived in Belgrade.*

What is your name?

When were you born?

Where are you from? / Where were you born? / Where did you grow up?

#### **Past:**

What was it like growing up here?

Who did you hang out with? / What kinds of people did you hang out with?

What kind of work did you do? (if applicable)

What was your school like?

Were you a Pionir?

What was your opinion of politics?

Would you say you were happy?

Did you do any traveling around Yugoslavia? / Did you go anywhere else?

#### **Present:**

What is it like living in Belgrade today?

What kinds of people do you hang out with?

What kind of work do you do?

What is school like today?

What is your opinion of present-day politics?

Are you happy?

#### **Future:**

What do you think Belgrade will be like in 10 years?

(if bad – What do you think should/can be done to change that? Do you think it can be changed?)

(if good – Why?)

Do you think you'll be hanging out with the same kinds of people?

What do you think politics will look like?

Do you think you'll be happy?

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