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## Yugoslav culture after Yugoslavia

### Kultura jugosłowiańska po rozpadzie Jugosławii

**Abstract:** In the states which formed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, ethnic/national cultures are developing independently, alongside a parallel shared post-Yugoslav culture. This culture is not a continuation of the official cultural collaboration between the Yugoslav nations which took place when Yugoslavia existed, rather it is a new phenomenon. It is appearing in opposition to nationalism, against the closing off of culture into narrow ethno-national frames and is based on the genuine existence of a cultural unity older than creation of the common Yugoslav state. It seeks creative responses to the problems caused by the wars and collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It also looks for the appropriate analytical instruments. The author uses the *Biblioteka XX vek* (The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Library) as an example – the book series which he founded and publishes in the field of humanities and social sciences. The alternative post-Yugoslav culture is characterised by the high quality of what it offers. However, its protagonists are simultaneously criticised by the nationalist circles in power in the states formed after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, who consider the post-Yugoslav cultural unity an alleged national betrayal.

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, post-Yugoslav culture, national identity, cultural unity, The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Library

**Streszczenie:** W państwach powstałych na obszarze byłej Jugosławii rozwijają się niezależne kultury etniczno-narodowe, a równolegle z nimi także wspólna kultura postjugosłowiańska. Kultura ta nie jest kontynuacją oficjalnej współpracy kulturalnej narodów jugosłowiańskich, jaka istniała w czasach Jugosławii, jest bowiem zjawiskiem nowym. Powstaje ona w kontrze do nacjonalizmu, sprzeciwie wobec zamykania kultury w wąskich ramach etniczno-narodowych i opiera się na rzeczywistym istnieniu wspólnoty kulturowej, starszej niż powstanie wspólnego państwa. Poszukuje się nowych, kreatywnych odpowiedzi na problemy wywołane wojnami i rozpadem Jugosławii w latach 90. Szuka się także odpowiednich instrumentów analitycznych. Jako przykład tych poszukiwań autor podaje „Bibliotekę XX wiek” [Library XX Century], tj. serię książek z zakresu nauk humanistycznych i społecznych, której jest założycielem i wydawcą. Alternatywna kultura postjugosłowiańska charakteryzuje się wysoką jakością tego, co oferuje. Jednocześnie jednak jej protagonisty są krytykowani przez środowiska nacjonalistyczne, sprawujące władzę

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w państwach powstałych po rozpadzie Jugosławii, które uznają postjugosłowiańską wspólnotę kulturową za rzekomą zdradę narodową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jugosławia, kultura postjugosłowiańska, tożsamość narodowa, wspólnota kulturowa, „Biblioteka XX wiek”

**1.** The see of Yugoslavia did not lead to a collapse of the Yugoslav cultural community. The nationalists who held power in the new states worked and continue to work towards dividing the shared culture of the Yugoslav nations, just as they divided up the territory of the common state. They are only partly successful in this. They justify their actions by the need to return to a cultural reality allegedly displaced in the common state. They point to the existence of varied and independent cultures which were purportedly connected only through links dictated by geography, more damaging than beneficial, because they prevented those cultures from carrying out a task important for the nation – embodying the so-called “national identity”. The nationalists have nothing against the organising of cultural exchange programmes involving audiences in one country discovering the culture of their neighbours who are, as they emphasise, something clearly separate from their domestic culture. This type of activity is considered important for keeping the peace in the region. In addition, as proof that they respect the needs of cultural minorities within their territory, the nationalist authorities of the new states allow minorities to nurture their minority culture, supposedly entirely different from the majority culture, to possess media in their own language, to play host to cultural creators visiting from their home states, with a programme marked by a specific “national identity”, supposedly entirely different from that held by the dominant national group.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, however, an alternative to the closed nationalist cultures is developing in the countries created from the former Yugoslavia in the form of a new culture, which reflects the spirit of Yugoslav unity. Its appearance and development have been more or less spontaneous. Those who create it do not show any intention of questioning

1 I have placed the expression “national identity” in quotation marks because I agree with the opinion presented by certain authors that it is inseparably linked with nationalist discourse and cannot be applied in a critical analysis of that discourse. There is more on this subject in my book: I. Čolović, *Rastanak s identitetom. Oglеди o političkoj antropologiji 4*, Beograd 2014, pp. 167-187.

the autonomy of the new nation states or promoting the idea of a new political Yugoslavism. Usually, they do not mention Yugoslavia. They are motivated by a desire to reach audiences in all the post-Yugoslav countries, to get through to people interested in their work. They remain conscious that there exists a regional cultural market that has survived Yugoslavia, with a supply and demand for popular music, literary bestsellers, films and TV series, which also covers many fields of the social sciences and humanities. Today, this “cultural market” is expanding dynamically because, in spite of the efforts of nationalists in power to divide and delineate Southern Slavic cultures, those cultures have retained certain major elements of proximity.

Firstly, in most of the new states (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro) people speak the same language, which was once known as Serbo-Croat and which remains the *lingua franca* in the remaining three countries (Slovenia, North Macedonia, Kosovo). Linguists who struggle to divide it up and create four languages from one have not succeeded in breaking up its community of users, which today, thanks mainly to electronic media, is perhaps more tightly connected than in the previous era. Anything new which appears in one variant of the shared language; every neologism, each “linguistic fashion”, is almost immediately taken up by users of the other variants.

Furthermore, in spite of the efforts of nationalists to divide the popular culture of the Yugoslav nations according to national criteria, this culture is bound by the same or very similar elements of form and content, and as a result, audiences consume everything which is on offer in this field as being “ours”, regardless of where it comes from. The entire region is additionally home to a phenomenon known as Yugonostalgia; nostalgic memories of Yugoslav unity. This most commonly manifests itself in popular culture in the form of reminiscing about Yugoslav sports stars, famous actors, and musicians. The extent of the spread of this phenomenon during the period since the end of the wars in the 1990s is attested by the book entitled *Leksikon Yu mitologije* (Lexicon of Yu Mythology), published in 2004<sup>2</sup>, which presents a curious catalogue of objects, personalities, films, advertisements, events, places, photographs, words, and other “memory places” of

2 *Leksikon Yu mitologije*, I. Adrić, V. Arsenijević, Đ. Matić (eds.), Beograd 2004.

the shared life of Yugoslavia. The authors of the material included in the book are many well-known characters as well as a great number of the so-called “ordinary people” from all over the former Yugoslavia. Nostalgic memories of socialist Yugoslavia are also attested by the frequent repeats of films about partisans shown on TV channels in all the former Yugoslav republics. Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia today have over a dozen restaurants serving a famous Sarajevan *ćevapčiče*, which are named *Das ist Walter* or simply *Walter* in reference to the 1972 film entitled *Walter brani Sarajevo* (Walter Defends Sarajevo), one of the most popular films about Tito’s partisans.

Finally, it should be stated that the nations of the region share a common history. In the past, they lived within the borders of single or separate states, took part in wars on the same or opposing sides, were and still are of different faiths and may be agnostics or atheists, but have always been closely connected. Nobody is fundamentally questioning this; however, nationalists are today proposing radically different interpretations of that common history, transforming it into centuries of suffering experienced by “our people” at the hands of their neighbours. The historical perspective thus defined leads to the logical conclusion that a shared culture of memory, a shared historical narrative, is simply impossible. Practical experience, however, negates this alleged impossibility. Apart from the irreconcilably unilateral historical narratives which sow hatred for neighbours as being eternal enemies, it is becoming increasingly common to produce artistic, journalistic, and scientific works concerning history, including some which touch on the wars of the 1990s. They show that even if the historical viewpoints of our region cannot be reconciled, they can certainly be learned, compared, and jointly analysed and interpreted. In their book *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi* (Yugoslavia from a Historical Perspective), the historians Milivoje Bešlin and Srđan Milošević write that “Yugoslavia has left a deep mark, and even today the reality of all its successor states is highly charged emotionally by the past. It can be assumed that this will continue for a long time

to come. This is an experience which cannot be erased, regardless of how it is appreciated and judged today.”<sup>3</sup>

**2.** Among intellectuals in the post-Yugoslav states, there were and still are those who strive to respect the existence of a common cultural space. Their efforts have not and do not contain any *jugonostalgije* (Yugonostalgia), and they are not motivated by a desire to maintain or revive the socialist culture of Yugoslavia which, as noted by one of the interpreters of the Yugonostalgia phenomenon, “outlived the society in which it formed.”<sup>4</sup> This cultural proximity for which appreciation is sought is older and stronger than either the monarchist or socialist incarnation of Yugoslavia, and did indeed “outlive” those two states and their societies as well as the quisling states that existed in the region during the Second World War. This cultural proximity is today younger and livelier than during the socialist Yugoslav era; it rose from its ruins during the last war and goes against nationalism and for the creation of a new transnational post-Yugoslav culture. If the creators and supporters of this new unity make reference to the Yugoslav past, it is only to reject the nationalist revisions of the Second World War and the reinterpretation of the role of the National Liberation Army during that period.

The first projects to appear as a sign of protest against the dissolution of the Yugoslav cultural community arose as early as the wars of the 1990s. In 1995-1998, the sociologist Božidar Jakšić organised a series of international symposia in Belgrade dealing with the war, politics, and culture in Yugoslavia. The common theme of these was a concept of interculturalism in opposition to nationalism, xenophobia, and racism. As well as participants from Serbia, there were also researchers, writers, and journalists from all the other post-Yugoslav states. Their talks were published in five collective works under

3 M. Bešlin, S. Milošević, *Multiperspektivnost (post)jugoslovenskihistorija*, [in:] *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi*, L. Perović, D. Roksandić, M. Velikonja, W. Hoepken, F. Bieber (eds.), Beograd 2017, p. 16.

4 D. Novačić, *Jugonostalgija – istorija bolesti*, XXZ magazin, 04.09.2018, <https://www.xxzmagazin.com/jugonostalgija-istorija-bolesti> [20.08.2021].

the editorship of Jakšić.<sup>5</sup> The organisation of those symposia and the publication of books with the papers of the conference participants were supported financially by foreign and international institutions including the Council of Europe and the Open Society Foundations. In Serbia, this project only received support and collaboration in its realisation from partners in the civil sector.

In Croatia too there exist intellectuals who were critical of Croatian nationalism and the concept of a national culture which was based on it, and who could only publish their works outside the official scientific institutions, in several new newspapers and magazines founded in the early 1990s, such as *Arkzin*, *Erazmus*, *Feral Tribune*, and *Zarez*, of which only the latter is still produced. The resistance against nationalism in those periodicals was also reflected in the fact that they were open to authors from Serbia and other former Yugoslav republics. These newspapers and magazines were thus oases of freedom, where a shared post-Yugoslav culture of opposition and critical thinking were formed.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was also possible for people dissatisfied with nationalist theses of the glamour and nature of war, and of the supposedly insurmountable differences between the cultures of the Yugoslav nations, to express their disapproval above all through participation in citizens' anti-war initiatives, such as the *Asocijacija nezavisnih intelektualaca Krug 99* (the Association of Independent Intellectuals Circle 99), founded in Sarajevo in 1994. This association was open to people from all parts of the former common state. The membership of Krug 99 also included names of some of the outstanding Yugoslav writers, journalists, historians, sociologists, political analysts, and culturologists from Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and other places. They participated in debates organised by Krug 99 and collaborated with the magazine *Revija slobodne misli* (the Review of Free Thought), published by Krug 99.

5 *Interkulturalnost u multietičkim društvima*, B. Jakšić (ed.), Beograd 1995; *Ka jeziku mira*, B. Jakšić (ed.), Beograd 1996; *Granice – izazov interkulturalnosti*, B. Jakšić (ed.), Beograd 1997; *Interkulturalnost versus rasizam i ksenofobija*, B. Jakšić (ed.), Beograd 1998; *Interkulturalnost i tolerancija*, B. Jakšić (ed.), Beograd 1999.

**3.** Over the last ten years, there has been a proliferation of festivals, forums, research, and publishing projects, seminars, and workshops, all of which have contributed to an affirmation of the Yugoslav cultural community post-Yugoslavia, even if that has not been their declared aim. One of the most notable events representing this is the *Jezici i nacionalizmi* (Languages and Nationalisms) project, initiated in early 2016 by the KROKODIL Association, i.e., *Književno regionalno okupljanje koje otklanja dosadu i letargiju* (the Literary Regional Gathering That Alleviates Boredom And Lethargy) based in Belgrade. The Association organized four expert conferences, one each in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the language used in those states was discussed. The conclusion reached was that there were four variants of one basically common tongue, making it the “shared standard of a polycentric language”. Following the suggestion of certain participants in this project, a *Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku* (Declaration on a common language) was prepared and then published in March 2017. Its signatories’ demands include “a cessation of the repressive, unnecessary, and harmful practices of dividing the language (...) and the right to ‘mix’, mutual openness, and intermingling of various forms and expressions of the shared language”. Within three weeks of publication, the Declaration had been signed by over 8,000 people from the four countries concerned, among them many well-known writers, artists, journalists, and scientists.<sup>6</sup>

A good example of joint research and interpretation of the historic past in the territory of the post-Yugoslav states are the summer schools, workshops, and publications which are collaborations between historians (*istoričara/povjesničara/historičara*) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia. There have been several notable projects of this type in recent years. Particularly noteworthy is *Kliofest*, an annual meeting of historians in Zagreb and other Croatian towns, the similar *History fest* project, which is held each year in Sarajevo and other towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the project entitled *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi* (Yugoslavia

6 This topic is discussed in detail by Ranko Bugarski. See more at: R. Bugarski, *Govorite li zajednički? Kako je nastala i kako je primljena Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku*, Beograd 2018.



via from a historical perspective), initiated by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. Experts, teachers, civic society activists, artists, writers, journalists, and witnesses to historic events from all the post-Yugoslav states take part in the development and realisation of the programmes for these projects (lectures, seminars, book promotions, public debates). Another essential element of these projects is that students and young people involved in organising civic society also take part in the events.<sup>7</sup>

This common Yugoslav culture, activated during the wars of the 1990s and still highly active in various spheres of cultural life, is not a continuation of the pro-Yugoslav cultural policy which existed in the common state. It has a new quality. Today's joint projects and workshops in the field of culture and knowledge are not based on the ideas which formed the basis for the cultural community in communist Yugoslavia. For example, nobody today invokes the spirit of "socialist humanism" or "socialism with a human face" in culture, which was the official doctrine of communist Yugoslavia after leaving the Soviet-dominated block of communist states. A new set of creative responses are being sought to the problems which brought about the end of communism, war, and the collapse of the common state.

The new reality, marked by the dominance of far-right political parties, the rebirth of nationalist and racist myths, and an unwillingness to take responsibility for the war crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s, requires analytical tools which will help to appropriately name and interpret the nature of those processes. It turned out that some of the theories and concepts which arose in philosophy and the social sciences in the West during the 1970s and 80s – which were not unknown to scholars in Yugoslavia but which previously had not seemed relevant for an analysis of the situation in their country – may now prove helpful. Faced with crisis, war, and ethnic nationalism, we (and here I also speak on behalf of myself as a participant in the projects discussed in this article) have taken an interest in the research and theories concerning the nation and nationalism, ethnicity and identity, multiculturalism and interculturalism, democracy and civic

7 Information about these projects can be found on the following internet websites: [www.kliofest.org](http://www.kliofest.org), [www.historyfest.ba](http://www.historyfest.ba), and [www.yuhistorija.com](http://www.yuhistorija.com).



society, the culture of human rights, social and political imaginarium, social capital and the power of symbols, fabrication of the historical past and the politics of memory, orientalism and balkanism, and other topics and questions. Furthermore, in our opinion, certain older research and concepts have taken on new meaning, such as Durkheim's 'anomie' theory, Freud's 'narcissism of small differences,' the 'banality of evil' by Hannah Arendt, or Braudel's 'long term.'

**4.** With the need for an analysis of the social and political life in the states formed after the collapse of Yugoslavia to involve use of the knowledge and experience achieved in recent decades by philosophy, and in the social sciences and humanities, I also had meetings in my capacity as founder and publisher of the *Biblioteka XX vek* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Library) series of books (essays, studies, discussions) about culture, society, and politics. Over the last twenty years, more than 150 books have been published as part of this series, including translations of authors whose ideas influenced humanist thinking in the second half of the 20th century, such as Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Said, Anthoni Smith, Clifford Geertz, Frédéric Bart, or Tzvetan Todorov. The need to listen to the opinions of relevant authors from the entire region, the need for a shared look at the problems which we faced during the crisis and collapse of Yugoslavia, have in turn encouraged me to publish, alongside books by authors from Serbia, an even greater number of works by authors from Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the *Biblioteka XX vek*.<sup>8</sup>

In my publishing work, it is relatively common that one cannot identify the national culture to which a published book belongs. One of these is the book by the Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik, *Alterkacije. Alternativni govori i ekstravaganтни članci* (1998) (*Altercations. Alternative Speech and Extravagant Articles*).<sup>9</sup> This was produced in such a way that the author, when reading the first version of the manuscript – which was a Serbo-Croat translation of some of his

8 The catalogue of the *Biblioteka XX vek* can be seen on the website: [www.bibliotekaxxvek.com](http://www.bibliotekaxxvek.com).

9 R. Močnik, *Alterkacije. Alternativni govori i ekstravaganтни članci*, Beograd 1998.

university lectures given in Slovenian, transcribed from audio recordings – created a new, longer version, with new parts written in Serbo-Croat. In this way, he created a book that was both a translation and an original, with the original being partly in Slovenian and partly in Serbo-Croat, leaving its “national identity” undefined. At the same time, it is a good example of knowledge creation in the *Biblioteka XX vek*, which is a small, joint post-Yugoslav workshop for creating social and scientific literature.

Another interesting example of a book with an undefined “identity” is the excellent study by the Croatian historian Vjekoslav Perica – *Balkanski idoli: Religija i nacionalizam u jugoslovenskim državama* (2006) (*Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*).<sup>10</sup> It was written by the author in English, as a foreign language, then the editors of the Oxford University Press, which published the book, “translated” Perica’s manuscript into correct English, and only then was the book translated into Serbo-Croat and published in the *Biblioteka XX vek*. Thus, it turned out that one of the most famous works of this Croatian historian does not exist in Croatian, but only in two other languages – English and (a genuine minor scandal for Croatian and Serbian nationalists) Serbo-Croat.

The book by the Slovenian linguist Vojko Gorjanc *Nije rečnik za seljaka* (2017) (*A Dictionary is not for a Peasant*) also only exists in a Serbo-Croat version.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript has not been published in Slovenian, and the author carried out the final editing on the translated manuscript. In order to receive the cataloguing documentation (CIP) at the National Library of Serbia, we were asked to give the title of the original. It turned out that Gorjanc had left the original without a title, so we quickly invented one: *Za kmeta ni slovar*. This book thus has a place within the common Yugoslav cultural space, regardless of whether or not the Slovenian national culture considers it one of its own.

10 V. Perica, *Balkanski idoli: Religija i nacionalizam u jugoslovenskim državama*, Beograd 2006.

11 V. Gorjanc, *Nije rečnik za seljaka*, Beograd 2017.

**5.** Those who today refuse to accept the radical demarcation of the common Yugoslav cultural space are involved in alternative projects and programmes and create works that have no characteristic marks of ethnic/national affiliation by consciously accepting a place on the margins of the officially recognised and publicly-funded cultural life in their states. This does not mean, though, that what they do goes unnoticed and unappreciated. The alternative culture of post-communist Yugoslav unity meets with a broad response throughout the region, mainly due to the generally high quality of what it offers, but also thanks to promotion in electronic media, which the nationalists in power are unable to control so easily, and thanks to support from sponsors from around the world who back projects aimed at creating a civic society.

The authorities in the new states formed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia generally avoid the use of severe repressive measures against those who question the domination of the nationalist culture policy. So, if they are employed in state-financed educational, scientific, or cultural institutions, they rarely if ever risk losing their jobs. The governing nationalists are generally satisfied that such people do not hold management positions in those institutions. When clashing with their critics, the authorities rely to a great degree on defaming them in the media they control, they may also rely on the help of opposition nationalists who accuse the rulers of not being consistent or radical in their nationalism, and who show them how consistent nationalists deal with citizens who have no national consciousness. In this way, the critics functioning within closed ethno-national cultures – those who demonstrate that such cultures feed off the provocation of identity wars with their neighbours, Second World War revisionism, transformation of war crimes into heroic acts, the division of the shared language, creation of myths about their own nation as the bringer of civilisation subject to genocide by barbaric nations – are labelled “traitors to the nation” and “foreign mercenaries” by the media. In Serbia, not in the corridors of power but among the nationalist circles who present themselves as the opposition, new terms have been coined – “autochauvinism”, “spirit of self-denial”, “national masochism” and others in the same vein – which allow critics of Serbian nationalism to be portrayed as kind of political patients who need to be

kept under observation, if not actually hospitalised. The symptoms of this disease include an allegedly unhealthy attachment to Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup>

Among those labelled a traitor is the famous Yugoslav actor Rade Šerbedžija. He is an alleged traitor in the eyes of both Croatian and Serbian nationalists for failing to show unconditional loyalty to either. This situation prompted him to give his volume of poetry the subversive title *Dvostruki izdajnik*. Šerbedžija talked about this in an interview given to the web portal *eSpona* in August 2019: "I joke in this way. Since, in both my first and second nation, as well as the third and maybe even fourth, there are always certain people who have strength... So, in all three of my nations, there are people who have achieved the strength of the pen and the power of the image, and who define the world according to their own will. Some of them were even film directors who finally convinced themselves that they are capable of defining the world according to their will. And those individuals from those nations act in such a way that they actually call you a traitor to your nations, to your new nations. I am glad to be traitor in the eyes of those kinds of people"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. Andelković: *Srpski nacionalni mazohizam – od jugoslovenstva do evroatlantizma*, Beograd 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Rade Šerbedžija, *dvostruki izdajnik*, 29.08.2019, <http://www.yurope.com/youqwest/SIGs/film/fil-movi/serbedzija.1.html> [19.02.2021].

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