The Political Dimension of Post-Socialist Memory Practices: Self-Organized Choirs in the Former Yugoslavia

Abstract. The article discusses cultural and social practices that take a positive approach to the Yugoslav socialist past. These practices represent a potential source of emancipation, reflection, and resistance. They potentially imply a call for collectivity and solidarity in various post-Yugoslav worlds, as well as across ethnic boundaries. In particular, the article discusses the self-organized youth choirs that sing songs from the Yugoslav socialist period. The phenomenon of self-organized choirs in the former Yugoslavia is considered a paradigmatic example of a pro-active, autonomous and emancipatory approach to the Yugoslav past. An approach, the author argues, that is a precondition for imagining and negotiating a “decent”, “normal”, “European” future in the post-Yugoslav space.

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Over the past two decades, western societies have been perplexed by the peculiar attitude of Eastern Europeans toward their socialist past. Positive feelings towards a past that had covered the space “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic”\(^1\) were met with the disapproving surprise of many members of the political elite and journalists. These western observers tended to consider such feelings a malady, a sign of moral weakness, irrationality, or evidence of the inability of individuals to find their place in the ongoing socioeconomic transformation. They were interpreted as the “result of a feeling of having lost out in the transition from communism to democracy”.\(^2\) Such feelings were not only considered deviant, surprising, and unnatural, they were also considered

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a threat to the still fragile democracies in the formerly communist states. According to this interpretation, these feelings should be repressed until they can be overcome.

In the case of the former Yugoslavia, where the end of socialism coincided with the violent breakdown of the federal state, expressions of a positive attitude toward Yugoslav socialism possess a dimension that makes them particularly problematic and intriguing for journalists and others engaged in shaping popular discourse. In the eyes of many, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s should suffice to prevent any such nostalgia. However, as a journalist wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2004, “a wave of nostalgia is sweeping countries born from the bloody conflicts in the 1990s”. This nostalgia is for socialism, a system that is seen as thoroughly different from Western democratic systems.\(^3\) In dominant discourses on the European level, the former Yugoslav societies are usually seen as obsessed with their past; an obsession that prevents them from turning to their “European” future. European politicians often point out that the countries of the Western Balkans have to choose between the (nationalist, reactionary, conflicted) past and the (European, integrative) future. For example in British Foreign Secretary William Hague’s words: “We want Serbia and the Western Balkans in the European Union. Therefore we think it is important to leave conflicts from the past behind and proceed ahead.” He also argued that the Serbian resolution regarding Kosovo better not be sent to the UN General Assembly,

> “because it is looking to the past instead of the future […]. Because of that today I am saying: look to the future – to new employment opportunities, new professional opportunities for people who are now in the street. All this you will find in EU membership, which should be a goal of Serbian politics.”\(^4\)

The former ICTY prosecution spokesperson and Balkans adviser Florence Hartmann stresses that this is “the argument that can be heard in the EU corridors and in all major European member states’ government offices: forget the tragic past, move on and look forward to a more promising future”.\(^5\)

At the same time, European voices tend to see the formerly Yugoslav societies as unable or unwilling to come to terms with their past. In the Western Balkan context, this discourse possesses an interesting corollary. Those political actors

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within the post-Yugoslav societies who propagate historical revisionism and the exclusion of the socialist past from the newly formed or updated national grand narratives are also quite unwilling to engage in the process of raising awareness and taking responsibility for what happened in the 1990s.

The belief that the preoccupation with the past, and especially the socialist past, is an obstacle to progress and a threat to democratic consolidation in Eastern European societies is not uncommon among scholars, either. In their largely empirical study, Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde understand “communist nostalgia” as “thinking of a return of the communist rule as of a preferable option”, as opposed to a “belief in the future, conceptualized as support for membership of the European Union”.6

In the conclusion of his recent article on nostalgia for socialism in Eastern Europe, Dominic Boyer warns that “we should listen to nostalgia more carefully” and “take seriously the fact that nostalgia talk in many contexts means something more or other than resignation to ‘westernization’ and melancholy for how much better or easier or younger life once was”. He suggests an interpretation of nostalgia that is “precisely the opposite of this – nostalgia’s obsessional method of past insistence can also serve as a way of drawing attention to an emergent politics of the future that is by no means settled”.7 He also warns that the “post-1989 Western European obsession with Eastern Europe’s obsession with the past must be understood as an anxious lateral signal that the pastness of Eastern Europe can no longer be taken for granted”.8

In this article, I highlight cultural and social practices that approach the Yugoslav socialist past positively and suggest a different reading of “former Yugoslavs’ obsession with the past”. According to this reading, the past may be a source of emancipation, reflection, and resistance. It may also be used as a call for collectivity and solidarity in various post-Yugoslav worlds, as well as across ethnic boundaries. As such this reading of the past may be used for imagining or demanding the promise of a better future. In particular, I discuss the cultural practices of self-organized youth choirs that sing songs from the socialist and Yugoslav period. By defining themselves as “garage choirs”, these groups draw a parallel to self-organized and non-commercial “garage bands”. As a phenomenon, self-organized choirs are of course not limited to the area of the former Yugoslavia, but we do find a noticeable and symptomatic upsurge of such choirs there. The oldest is Horkeškart (= choir + orchestra + Škart), established by the Belgrade artistic and activist group Škart. The choir, which celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, was renamed to Horkestar (choir + orchestra)

6 Ekman / Linde, Communist Nostalgia (above fn. 2), 358.
7 Dominic Boyer, From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania, in: Todorova / Gille (eds.), Post-Communist Nostalgia (above fn. 1), 17-28, 27.
8 Ibid., 23.
in 2006, when it ended its collaboration with Škart. Škart recently established another choir called Proba. In Zagreb a lesbian choir named LeZbor (a pun on words, since it also means something like “le choir”) is active. There is another one in Belgrade by the name of LeWhore. Raspeani Skopjani is a self-organized choir in Skopje, Macedonia, and Kombinat is an all-female self-organized choir in Ljubljana. Finally, the choir 29. Novembar, active in Vienna, Austria, sings songs from all parts of the former Yugoslavia. All these choirs were established during the last decade and have attracted significant public attention.

I take the phenomenon of self-organized choirs in the former Yugoslavia as a paradigmatic example of acting in the post-Yugoslav social and cultural spaces in a way that approaches the socialist Yugoslav past in a pro-active, autonomous and emancipatory manner. I believe this to be a precondition for imagining and negotiating a “decent”, “normal”, “European” future in these countries. In line with Balibar, I understand the political as a threefold concept comprised of emancipation, transformation, and civility.9

Despite significant variations in their membership, credo, and repertoire, these choirs share several important features. Thus, we can speak of these choirs as a post-Yugoslav phenomenon, and especially so in light of the facts that they have all emerged in various parts of the former Yugoslavia over the last decade and that there exists an obvious interconnectedness and mutual inspiration between them. All of these choirs, to some extent, reach for the recent – socialist and Yugoslav – past through the songs and lyrics that they perform. They all consider social activism an essential part of what they do. References to the Yugoslav socialist past are made within two thematic blocks of songs: partisan songs and songs of work, of “renewal and construction”.

**Partisan Songs**

A clearly antifascist stance is expressed in the activities of most of these choirs. The choir Kombinat was established in 2008, on April 27, the Day of Resistance (a national holiday in Slovenia and the former socialist holiday “Day of the Liberation Front”). It sings partisan songs from different parts of the former Yugoslavia and defines its mission as saving songs, as well as once-existing values, from oblivion. LeZbor from Zagreb also has revolutionary songs in its repertoire. In November 2009, members of LeZbor joined the march in Zagreb against the perceived turn toward fascism in Croatian society. The choir performed revolutionary songs from the former Yugoslavia and from the Spanish

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Civil War. These choirs often perform in places that were symbolically charged during socialism and marginalized afterwards, such as monuments dedicated to heroes of the antifascist struggle. Through these performances, the performers re-actualize these places, giving them a meaning different from the one they had in the socialist period. The end of socialism liberated these places from their ideological armor, and emancipatory practices became possible there.

In general, attempts to approach the socialist past from an autonomous position go hand in hand with affirmative attitudes toward the antifascist legacy and the partisan movement of the Second World War. The performance of partisan songs by self-organized choirs should in fact be understood as a reaction to historical revisionism in the former Yugoslav societies. It is also part of a wider effort to establish a new attitude toward the partisan movement, the Yugoslav antifascist struggle, and their legacies that enables people to preserve these past struggles’ universal values, aesthetics, and mobilizing potential. Through the singing practices of self-organized choirs, partisan songs become songs of resistance. The choir Kombinat from Ljubljana started by singing Yugoslav partisan songs and then broadened its repertoire to include songs of resistance from all over the world. Singing partisan and revolutionary songs from the former Yugoslavia relates these self-organized choirs to partisan choirs formed during World War Two, which have a long tradition. Some of the latter are still active, particularly in Slovenia. Kombinat closely cooperates and sings together with some of these partisan choirs. There is nevertheless an important

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11 Cf. Rastko Močnik on the change in perception of the partisan symbolic production that took place at socialism’s demise and on why it is now closer and more available to us, Rastko Močnik, Partizanska simbolička politika, Zarez 161-162, 8 September 2005, available at <http://www.zarez.hr/161/z_esej.htm>.
13 In the Slovenian documentary “Pesem upora” (The Song of Resistance), the author Andaž Pöschl also places partisan songs within a long-term Slovenian tradition in order to employ the songs “as a weapon for resistance”. The film searches for an explanation of the recent revival of interest in partisan songs in Slovenia not only in the neo-liberal reality, but also in the need to rethink the Slovenes’ attitude toward their recent past in socialist Yugoslavia. The documentary is online at the RTV Slovenija’s website, available at <http://tvslo.si/predvajaj/pesem-upora/ava2.91882302/>. 
difference between the two types of choirs. Although the partisan choirs have some new and younger members, there is a direct continuity between partisan choirs in the post-World War Two period and the practices of organized singing during the war. The performance of partisan songs by self-organized choirs, on the other hand, has nothing to do with the experiences or the memories of their members. In the case of self-organized choirs, therefore, we cannot speak of continuity but rather of a generational transfer of values that are considered worthy of being saved from oblivion and necessary for building the future. On Kombinat’s webpage, the choir’s self-presentation stresses the importance of this generational transfer with the following sentence:

“We have never been in the woods, we have never been hungry, we never had to think of laying our lives on the altar of any ideology; since we can remember, we have been free to speak our language.”

**Songs of Work, “Renewal and Construction”**

Another important theme in the repertoire of self-organized choirs in the former Yugoslavia consists of songs of “renewal and construction” (obnova i izgradnja). These songs come from the socialist period, when labor was promoted as a value shared by all and the worker was a central figure of socialist ideology. Compared with the present neo-liberal reality, the socialist past was also a time of social security when health-care and education were available to all. On their website, the members of the Kombinat choir state:

“[…] our times swallow the human soul and glorify success, competition, and appearance, not caring for human rights, although often borrowing them as an alibi”.

Apart from its repertoire and of course its name, Kombinat refers to labour in socialism by using iconography related to socialist workers (like the hammer and sickle) on its website and the posters announcing its performances. Members of Horkestar from Belgrade often perform dressed in blue workers’ overalls. The (female) conductor wears borosane, a sort of shoes characteristically worn by women at their workplaces during socialism (the shoes were – and are – produced by the Borovo shoe factory, hence the name). Songs about work and about building-up the country are an important part of Horkestar’s repertoire. The choir has often performed in places that used to be symbolically connected with the ideology of industrial work in socialism (mining towers, abandoned

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15 Ibid.
factories, and the like). Together with the civic initiative “Ploštad Svoboda”, the Macedonian choir Raspeani Skopjani sings the song “Gradot ubav pak ke nikne” (The beautiful city will be built again). This song was sung during the reconstruction of Skopje after the disastrous earthquake of 1963. In this way, its members protest against the city authorities’ plan to build a church on Skopje’s main square.

The Refusal of Irony, the Refusal of Nostalgia, and the Call for Solidarity

It is possible to read as ironic the practices of young people who wear T-shirts emblazoned with the hammer and sickle or industrial workers’ overalls and sing songs from the socialist period. Indeed, outsiders often perceive these practices as ironic. Yet, the audiences in the former Yugoslavia and the actors themselves insist upon refusing irony, similarly to what Maya Nadkarni described for post-socialist Hungary. On its website, the Kombinat choir stresses that its members are “ordinary people” who work in various professions. This statement implies the choir members’ own vulnerability in times of neo-liberal capitalism:

“Among us are educators, teachers, professors, lawyers, social workers, an archaeologist, a biologist, a secretary, an accountant, a chemical technician, a restaurateur, a student, a singer-songwriter, a communications expert, journalists, an economist, an independent entrepreneur, a scholar …”

Members of the Horkestar choir explain that they wear workers’ overalls as an expression of solidarity with workers and other underprivileged and marginalized parts of society, such as refugees, peasants and minority communities. Horkestar has performed in refugee centers, market places, village schools, improvised Roma settlements, etc.

As Nadkarni points out, in the socialist era irony was a necessary survival strategy. It “was not only a widespread means of reading official culture and navigating public life, but arguably the very condition for political subjectivity

19 I have presented my research on self-organized choirs in the former Yugoslavia at several conferences. Participants who were not familiar with this phenomenon quite often interpreted these practices as irony.
21 Kombinat, O nas (above fn. 14).
within the regime”. In post-socialism, however, it seems misplaced to understand (over-)identification with the former regime’s symbols and rhetoric as a means of using irony to ridicule it. The socialist regime is gone, and with it the reason for irony. In the case of Yugoslavia, not only the socialist regime, but also the country related to it disappeared. The writer Miljenko Jergović provides an illustrative example of how one former Yugoslav’s relation to the vanished (socialist) country has changed:

“Until 1991, I had no attitude toward Yugoslavia. I belong to the generation born in the mid-1960s, and we were cynical about that country, its social system, and its icons. We did not love that country, we also did not hate it – we just related to it in the way any normal kid would relate to the country he was born in […]. Speaking of emotions we had for this country, we actually speak about what we started feeling after it was gone.”

That is also why partisan art, which is now detached from the dominant ideology, can “talk to us, become visible and watchable”. The incongruity between intention and reality, which lies at the foundation of irony, is motivated by “the conviction in a notion of truth that can only be achieved through a self-alienated perspective: an awareness of the gap between what is said and what is meant”. Identifying with workers and other subjects of socialist ideology does not imply such a gap. It is instead an expression of solidarity because it resists dominant discourses (which condemn or at best ignore the socialist legacy). It is not a mockery or a (mis-)use of workers or the partisan legacy by an alternative, artistic elite.

In her explanatory model for understanding attitudes toward mass culture in post-socialist Hungary, Maya Nadkarni offers nostalgia, understood as a longing for lost authenticity and virtuosity, as an alternative to irony. She simultaneously points out the potential of nostalgic sentiments to enable people to avoid political connotations. Since self-organized choirs intend precisely to

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24 Cf. for example, the Belgrade band Idoli’s song “Mal’chiki”, issued in 1981, that used the worker theme to ridicule the system, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KAwOd1sSks>.


26 Močnik, Partizanska simbolička politika (above fn. 11).

intervene in the sphere of the political, albeit without political means, they deny any association with nostalgia as far as their activities are concerned:

“We often face a presumption that what we do is a result of a nostalgic feeling and of looking back to the past. True, some of the songs we sing are 100 and more years old and were created in the past, but it does not mean that we are past-oriented, because we believe that the values promoted by these songs are still important. We try to say to each individual that resistance is a value, just as her or his dignity is a value.”

The way that this choir presents itself in the internet, including its Facebook profile, expresses its refusal of nostalgia:

“We are not nostalgic, we sing with the belief in values such as solidarity, faithfulness to one’s convictions, heart and courage.”

The disavowal of nostalgia in these statements should be regarded as the consequence of a dialogue with the national(istic) discourses dominating public spaces in the former Yugoslav societies. A dialogue in which these choirs are inevitably, but also deliberately, engaged. In these discourses, all positive evaluations of everyday social and cultural life in socialist Yugoslavia are labeled as Yugo-nostalgia. This generalization reduces these positive attitudes to sentiments of people that are paralyzed in an idealized past. They are considered a passive longing of certain individuals, an understanding that simultaneously prevents their political use and seriously weakens their emancipatory potential. Those who express positive attitudes towards the socialist Yugoslav past are delegitimized and condemned in these discourses as irrational, unpatriotic, reactionary, and immoral. In this light, the self-organized choirs’ need to make explicit their refusal of nostalgia for the (socialist) past comes as no surprise.

By distancing themselves from the experienced socialist past the choir members aim to assure legitimacy and “objectivity” for their social activism. The generation gap, however, does not imply that the cultural practice of self-organized choirs singing revolutionary and workers’ songs should be understood in the same vein as “the creation of new bars, cafes, and restaurants, as well as

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28 Maksimilijana Ipavec, the leader of the Kombinat choir, in the documentary “Pesem upora”. Pesem upora (The Song of Resistance), directed by Andraž Pöschl (2009) (above fn. 13).
30 Here, I understand “political” in a wider sense, not only as it is reflected in the discourses of the elites in power, but also in (discursive) actions that “involve power, or its inverse, resistance” in many other contexts. These include unofficial and informal contexts, and various types of social actions, including cultural activities. Paul Chilton / Christina Schäffner, Discourse and Politics, in: Teun van Dijk (ed.), Discourse as Social Interaction. Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Vol. 2. London 1997, 206-230, 212. Cf. Rudolf De Cilla / Martin Reisigl / Ruth Wodak, The Discursive Construction of National Identities, Discourse & Society 10 (1999), n. 2, 149-173, 152.
special ‘nostalgia-themed’ parties, that market the exoticism of the recent past
to a generation of teenagers and young adults too young to have any memory
of the socialist era themselves”.³¹ Such an understanding would also neutralize
any possibility of political action. The post-socialist disavowal of nostalgia can
hardly be understood without a broader European perspective. On the European
level, former socialist societies (i.e. those of Eastern Europe) that “scrambled
to redefine themselves in the capitalist firmament” are treated by the Western
European societies with paternalism, “triumphalism and self-congratulation”.³²
Here, the Eastern European appears as “a figure whose past trauma casts into
doubt his/her capacity to function effectively as a historical actor in the future”.³³
Even the Eastern European’s capability of functioning as a politically relevant
actor in the present is drawn into question. This explanatory framework is, as
Dominic Boyer rightfully stresses,

“so intuitively familiar, both because it has been well publicized as a mode of legiti-
matory projects of external intervention into Eastern Europe and because it taps into
long-standing narratives of Eastern European past-orientation and backwardness
that have exercised powerful historical influence over social identities in Eastern
Europe, particularly regarding their relationship to the West”.³⁴

As a sub-region of Eastern Europe in the ideological sense, the Balkans, including
the former Yugoslavia, “represented a cultural and religious ‘Other’ to Europe
‘proper’” where “[t]his older symbolic geography was reinforced in the post-war
(cold war) period by an ideological and political geography of the democratic,
capitalist west versus the totalitarian, communist east”.³⁵ In this light, the
association of self-organized choirs with post-socialist nostalgia/Yugo-nostalgia
would cast serious doubt on their legitimacy to act as promoters of universal
values. Although the values referring to the (Yugoslav) socialist ideology on
which these choirs insist - such as antifascism, solidarity as well as workers’ and
human rights - are essentially European and universal, any convergence between
socialist (Yugoslav) and universal (European) values has proven impossible.

³¹ Maya Nadkarni Olga Shevchenko, The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative
³² Michael Herzfeld, Foreword to Daphne Berda, On the Social Life of Postsocialism:
³³ Boyer, From Algos to Autonomos (above fn. 7), 19.
³⁴ Ibid.
³⁵ Milica Bakić-Hayden Robert Hayden, Orientalist Variations on the Theme “Balkans”:
Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics, Slavic Review 51 (1992), n. 1, 3-5;
cf. Fikret Adanir, Religious Communities and Ethnic Groups under Imperial Sway: Ottoman
and Habsburg Lands in Comparison, in: Dirk Hoerder Christiane Harzig Adrian Schubert
(eds.), The Historical Practice of Diversity. New York 2003, 54-86. See also Maria Todorova, The
Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European National-
ism, Slavic Review 64 (2005), n. 1, 140-164; Tanja Petrović, A Long Way Home: Representations
of the Western Balkans in Media and Political Discourses. Ljubljana 2009.
Any attempt to marry socialist and universal values is delegitimized by the dominant discourses. On the European level, it is insinuated that post-socialist Eastern Europeans are incapable of acquiring or practicing “Europeanness”. On the national levels, everything drawing on the socialist and Yugoslav past is rejected by revisionist practices. The rejection of nostalgia is one way for choirs to deal with the impossibility of portraying Yugoslav values as universal values. The other is to balance the choir’s repertoire between “domestic” songs of resistance and “foreign” or international ones and to insist on the cosmopolitan nature of one’s actions.

While the refusal of irony is shared by the performers and their audience, the attitude toward nostalgia is anything but unanimous. Though most members of the self-organized choirs have, at best, childhood memories of socialism, their songs are incorporated into the life experience of a significant part of the audience. For these people, listening to these songs today inevitably evokes nostalgic sentiments about the socialist past. Such individual nostalgic expressions typically avoid any political engagement or are perceived as void of political potential.\(^{36}\) The writer Muharem Bazdulj has claimed that reducing memories of Yugoslavia to a “smell of čevapčići in the čaršija” and treating everyday, cultural and political phenomena from the Yugoslav period in a relaxed and somewhat parodistic manner helps to confine references to Yugoslavia to the non-political sphere.\(^{37}\) It is the synergy between individual expressions of nostalgia made by people with personal memories of socialism and public as well as collective expressions of positive attitudes toward the socialist past, followed by a refusal of nostalgia, that enables the latter to actually bear the potential for political action and mobilization. For this reason, it would be wrong to neglect the political role of individual memories of socialism. What is usually labeled as nostalgia often implies a simple demand for normalcy and for the “right to remember”. The Serbian journalist Teofil Pančić described this demand as, “the need to offer proof that everything from our past that we remember so well was not a dream or imagination, a proof that we were and remained somewhere and

\(^{36}\) Saša Ilić recently pointed to a similar mechanism in the case of the Belgrade band Eka-
tarina Velika, founded in 1981 and dissolved in 1994 after the premature death of its leader Milan Mladenović (aged 36). The band’s music today is largely perceived in a consumerist, Yugo-nostalgic framework. Its members’ social criticism and the anti-war political stance that they held during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which is clearly expressed in their music, has been largely overlooked and marginalized. Saša Ilić, Živeti i umreti u društvu bez pameti, Novosti, 24 July 2011, available at <http://www.novosti.com/2011/07/ziveti-i-umreti-u-drustvu-bez-pameti/>.

someone”. By articulating this need, individuals and groups whose endeavors are related to nostalgia because of their life experience are in fact engaging in a political dialogue with the dominant discourses on both the European and the national level. The self-organized choirs that reject nostalgia are doing the same. Such engagement necessarily transcends individual expressions. It is, in fact, an effort to refuse “a regression into the gossip of the private”, as Bazduž put it, and to present an approach to the Yugoslav past that goes beyond personal and nostalgic sentiments. In this sense, such engagement refuses nostalgia as it is understood in the dominant post-socialist discourses. Nostalgia is not employed as a sentiment for an idealized past or one’s youth, nor is it a reactionary political preference for totalitarian rule. It also contains the refusal of irony. These two combined refusals open up space for an active stance, for expressions of solidarity, and they create a potential for resistance. The public discussion organized by the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade on 27 October 2010 engaged the writers Ante Tomić, Miljenko Jergović and Muharem Bazduž, the actress Mirjana Karanović, the director Želimir Žilnik, and the journalist Teofil Pančić in an exchange of their views on the memory of socialist Yugoslavia and the ways in which it is negotiated today. The discussion is a sign that efforts to gain political relevance gradually become more visible in the post-Yugoslav public spheres. Another example is the Yugoslav Drama Theater in Belgrade which is currently staging Dino Mustafić’s play “Born in YU”. The play has been described as “a collective autobiographical essay”, and begins with all the actors reciting their actual personal registration numbers. This so-called “Unique Master Citizen Number” (Jedinstveni matični broj građana, JMBG), was introduced in Yugoslavia in 1977 and is still in use in all of the post-Yugoslav states today. The play has provoked much curiosity in the media of the former Yugoslav states, because the audience instantly stood up and sung at the moment when the former Yugoslav hymn was intoned. It would be wrong to understand this as an act of naive and nostalgic identification or as an expression of irony. Rather, it was “an act of solidarity and emotional exchange, a message that reads: We understand each other and we know well what we are talking about”.

In her essay on the Kombinat choir, Lidija Radiojević asks why we need to look into the past to get inspiration for resistance. The present European reality, where only certain pasts are seen as suitable for keeping a continuity, claiming

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39 Rodenima u YU zabranjeno sjećanje (above fn. 25).
normalcy, and negotiating “Europeanness”, calls for a modification of this question. Now, we must ask, whose past should/can be a source of resistance? Can “our” (socialist, Yugoslav) past be that source of resistance for our purposes? In the specific Yugoslav context, obsession with the past and its different versions is usually seen as the main obstacle to reconciliation and normalization. In this context, it is even more important to ask to what extent the common, socialist Yugoslav past, as well as memory practices related to that past, can foster the region’s future prospects.

Can the Past be the Armature that Binds Us?

In July 2010, I spoke to Dragan Protić, a Belgrade architect and artist, who is one of the founders of the alternative artists’ group Škart and the Horkeškart choir. We discussed these groups’ earlier activities and the performance of an architectural hymn and technical love poem called Armature in November 1993. According to Dragan Živković, who is also the curator and former director of the Belgrade Museum of Applied Arts, two opposing events marked the year 1993. One was the demolition of the Mostar bridge, and the other the performance of Armature. Protić commented on this performance:

“Škart was founded at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade, and there we performed this hymn, which contains only one line: Armature is what binds us. Our idea was for this song to be performed in all former Yugoslav republics – to stress that there is a supra-space that binds us – OK, armature is a rather banal architectural metaphor for it. We thought that it is crucially important to say that solidarity and unity are important and that collective resistance and collective investment in the future could lead to a change. Unfortunately, in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia we have missed the chance to recognize this. If we were collectively and more decisively against what was going on in the 1990s, we would now be as normal as the rest of the world. And I believe that the demonization of socialism, among other things, led to alienation and collective obedience in the 1990s.”

Almost two decades after Armature was performed, it seems appropriate to ask about the degree to which the shared Yugoslav socialist past can nowadays be an armature that binds us. It is also time to ask to what extent people who aim at establishing a more emancipatory and autonomous attitude toward the socialist past have put this re-binding on their agenda. While the self-organized choirs insist on the cosmopolitan and universal nature of their activities through their choice of repertoire, the meta discourses that accompany their performances as well as their cooperation with similar choirs from other parts of Europe, the

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43 Interview with Dragan Protić, Belgrade, July 2010.
area of the former Yugoslavia nevertheless seems to be the “natural space” for their activities. When the group Škart established the Horkeštart choir in 2000, it insisted on keeping and strengthening the ties among the societies of the former Yugoslavia even though the federation had been torn apart in blood and violence. Members of Horkeštart were the first large, organized group from Serbia to include Croatia on a tour in 2001. All self-organized choirs from the former Yugoslavia cooperate with each other, visit each other, and perform together. For example, Horkestar visited LeZbor in Zagreb in 2007. In Skopje on 9 May 2010 they celebrated Victory Day by performing the “International” with Raspeani Skopjani in Macedonian and Serbian.44 In August 2010, Kombinat performed together with Proba at the Serbian pavilion of the Venice Architectural Biennale.45 In November these two choirs jointly performed in Ljubljana.46 The first festival of self-organized choirs from the former Yugoslavia was held in Belgrade in May 2011.47

This network of close cooperation allows us to observe self-organized choirs in the former Yugoslavia as a post-Yugoslav socio-cultural phenomenon. Arguments usually used to explain present-day regional cohesive processes, such as market-related and economic interests, geographical proximity, lower costs on account of language similarities and local knowledge, cautiously avoid mentioning the common past. These arguments prove unsatisfactory when applied to the primarily activist and non-commercial activities of these choirs. As the anthropologist Larisa Kurtović rightfully stresses, intensified processes of cultural and economic re-integration in the post-Yugoslav space “can be a message of hope only if they open a space for [the] realization of more progressive and socially constructive ideas”.48

Kurtović recently wrote about the importance of a more critical and ideologically independent approach to the socialist past in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She has also described the necessity of politically articulating questions about how the Yugoslav socialist legacy can become a legitimate part of the struggle for a better future.49 In Bosnia and Herzegovina, which frequently has been referred

49 Ibid.
to as “Yugoslavia en miniature” and where a broad consensus prevails that “there is no future here”, this is indeed an urgent and vitally important task. Yet it is also important for the other parts of the former Yugoslavia. An autonomous and de-ideologized approach to the common Yugoslav past could help to establish and solidify foundations of “normalcy” in post-Yugoslav societies and thus to strengthen their prospects for a “normal”, “European” future. Such an approach would also provide for more sincere and more acceptable options for self-identification than the ones that are offered by the current European symbolic geography, in which the former Yugoslavs have the choice between only two concepts. One is Tim Judah’s *Yugosphere*, which reduces all integrative forces in the region to the neo-liberal concepts of the market, low costs, and high profits. The *Yugosphere* idea presents the post-Yugoslav integrative processes as something no one really wants but that all are forced into in order to survive economically. This concept ignores the common past, although it is something that essentially connects the societies in this region and should, therefore, be considered when building the region’s future.

The other concept employs neo-colonial or quasi-colonial relations. Within it, the post-Yugoslav societies, now refurbished under the name “the Western Balkans”, are treated as “a sphere of interest” by neighboring EU members. Exonerated in this way from the common past, they also treat each other the same way, internalizing the paternalistic attitude with which “core Europe” approaches the whole region. Neither of these two concepts bears any promise for an autonomy of individuals, collectivities, and societies in the former Yugoslavia, which however is a necessary requirement for a sustainable future.

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50 Ibid.
52 In August 2010, a year after his article on the “Yugosphere” was published in *The Economist*, Judah published an article in the Croatian weekly *Globus* entitled “Forgive Me for the Yugosphere”. In the Globus article, he provided many reasons for the existence of a Yugosphere and examples of Yugospheric “events”, but he again avoided mentioning the common past as a factor of coherence in the former Yugoslavia. Cf. Tim Judah, Oprostite za Jugospheru, *Globus*, 16 August 2010, available at <http://globus.jutarnji.hr/hrvatska/ekskluzivno-za-globus>.
53 “Western Balkans” is a semantically negative denomination: The question of what it is can be answered only by inverting it to asking what it is not. The answer, then, becomes self-evident: It is not a part of the European Union. In fact, it is also a name that is expected to disappear once all the countries located between Slovenia in the west, Hungary in the north, Romania and Bulgaria in the east, and Greece in the south have joined the EU. As such, it does not seem to be a category appropriate for positive self-identification or the imagining of a sustainable future in the region. Petrović, *A Long Way Home* (above fn. 35), 53-60 and passim.