

Reconciliation and Popular Culture: A Promising Development in Former Yugoslavia?

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Sažetak

Iako su politički i pravni pristupi procesu pomirenja u bivšoj Jugoslaviji značajni, popularna kultura igra bitnu, mada ne uvijek prepoznatljivu ili priznatu, ulogu u mirenju naroda bivše Jugoslavije.

Mirovne izjave državnih predstavnika često su rezultat, a ne uzrok, promjene stavova kod običnih građana. Ovaj članak nastoji ispitati u kojoj mjeri su neformalni kulturni proizvodi i procesi utjecali na tu promjenu stavova, i da li te promjene dopiru do najviših političkih struktura u post-jugoslovenskim državama. Članak se bavi pitanjem da li se nedavne tendencije prema pomirenju u državnoj politici mogu barem donekle pripisati razvitku mirovne popularne kulture.

U tekstu će biti prikazana i vrijednovana dva primjera pop kulture koji preuzimaju povijesno jedinstveni teren pop kulture: fenomen nedavno objavljene knjige *Leksikon Yu Mitologije* i entuzijazam za ex-jugoslovensku popularnu muziku. Članak se završava zaključcima o tome kakav utjecaj predstavljeni primjeri mogu imati na proces pomirenja prije svega u bivšoj Jugoslaviji, ali i na procese pomirenja u drugim dijelovima svijeta.

Abstract

This paper will argue that popular culture is an arena where reconciliation can and is taking place in former Yugoslavia. It will do so by focusing on two recent examples of pop cultural phenomena that have had a positive impact on this ultimate goal. By focusing on popular culture in this paper I seek to complement the work done by others on the causes of violence, the crimes committed, identification of the victims and prosecution of the perpetrators without which reconciliation will not be possible. I would like to argue, however, that popular culture, a generally overlooked area in discussions of reconciliation, can also make a valuable contribution towards the goal of reconciliation for which, unfortunately, we have no simple recipe. The goal of reconciliation in former Yugoslavia, as in any other post-conflict situation,

will require a multi-pronged and multi-layered approach if it is to have any hope of succeeding.

A positive prognosis for reconciliation inevitably stems from acknowledgement that at some point in time there was a positive experience of co-existence. The very term 'RE-conciliation' suggests that a conciliatory relationship existed which needs to be re-established. In the context of the former Yugoslavia, this inevitably leads back to the question whether co-existence in this former state did in fact ever exist. Was Yugoslavia ever a truly multi-ethnic society or was co-existence forced upon its citizens by an autocratic government, as is often claimed? I would like to emphasize, as others have done before me, that if there was truly no multicultural, intermingled and tolerant society in the past, then we cannot possibly discuss or hope to achieve reconciliation. There is nothing and no-one to reconcile.

I would like to assert in this paper, backed up by case studies gathered since the mid 1990s in the arena of Yugoslav popular culture, that there was indeed organic co-existence, and that once lost, was mourned by some former Yugoslav citizens. There is clear evidence that despite efforts by newly established states and their governments, and a general atmosphere of public censure, fragments of common Yugoslav culture were even during the war years of interest to former Yugoslavs. Ugrešić notes that '[t]hey say that in Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana videocassettes of old 'Yugoslav' films are sold illegally. In Skopje, they say, a cassette of 'Yugo-hits' from the sixties is selling like hot cakes'.¹ It is this desire for Yugoslav cultural artefacts that also found a new medium in the form of the internet, and fostered an explosion of download sites for ex-yu music, lyrics and forums.

It is important to emphasize at this point that neither popular culture in particular, nor culture in general is necessarily constructive to reconciliation as a whole. There are also a number of examples of pop culture in the service of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, such as the examples of turbofolk in Serbia or the singer Thompson in Croatia. In former Yugoslav societies, as is generally the case in any society, culture is a 'contested space' where struggles for domination take place.² Ramet has argued that the cultural realm becomes inevitably political particularly in a communist system, because such systems 'define culture in political terms'.³ In providing examples of popular culture that are promising for reconciliation I hope to provide some compelling reasons why popular culture is a powerful tool and should not be discounted as a barometer of progress towards reconciliation.

The Lexicon of Ex-Yu Mythology

In 1989, author Dubravka Ugrešić and Dejan Krsić, then an editor of *Start* magazine, started a project in the magazine to compile a lexicon of Yugoslav pop culture, arguing that popular culture was a completely unexplored and unacknowledged aspect of life in Yugoslavia. The project was entitled *The Lexicon of Yu Mythology*. From the beginning, instead of convening a panel of experts, the project was designed to involve all citizens wishing to be involved,

believing that they were all equally qualified to identify and comment on Yugoslav popular culture. The original brief stated:

We expect from you, our collaborators, imaginative and inexpert analysis of concepts (myths, phenomena ...) from everyday Yugoslav life (political, ideological, consumer, media-related etc.) from 1945 until today.⁴

Following the publication of her book *The Culture of Lies*, Dubravka Ugrešić collaborated in the revival of the *Lexicon* project on the internet, aiming to harness and collect in one place the memories of former Yugoslavs. Ugrešić, in a letter posted to the site, informs the visitor of the point of the revived project:

[I]et our virtual lexicon be a communal work of those who do not agree to what the authorities in post-Yugoslav states have achieved with force: the confiscation of memory.⁵

The numerous letters posted to the site showcase the range of enthusiasm and emotion stirred among the diasporic community by the project. One letter reads:

It is indescribably good that this virtual space exists in which we can move and meet without hassle. I laughed sweetly reading the list. Like through a time machine, I quickly passed through my whole life. Thank you.⁶

The *Lexicon* arouses strong emotions because it represents the denied personal histories of individuals. Mayda, another visitor, succinctly outlines why this project is important for reconciliation:

This project of yours I see not as something for nostalgia or curiosity, but as a beginning of the process of healing, and the first natural step back to sanity, as it should be. The feelings that people who loved Yugoslavia have, and who were proud to be from there, cannot just be dismissed as YU nostalgia, that is a small and demeaning expression. It does not encompass the anger and helplessness that we feel when we see what they offer us as an alternative.⁷

Mayda, like many other ex-Yugoslavs, understands that her participation is an act of resistance to the dominance of nationalist discourses in former Yugoslav territories, and sees the project as a positive step towards healing; as she terms it: 'a first natural step back to sanity'.⁸

The goal from the start of the project was the publication of the gathered entries, a tangible account of the sheer volume of memory of lived experience that it represents. In the post-1990, post-Yugoslav world the *Lexicon* is unambiguously a political statement by (ex-)Yugoslavs who do not wish their social history to be erased from public memory. It was finally published in late 2004 in Belgrade by Rende and Zagreb by Postscriptum. It has, since then, almost sold out three editions, despite often not being displayed in shop windows because of its 'provocative' cover – a large image of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) flag.

While the project has certainly been accused of being 'Yugonostalgic', a term I will discuss a little further on, I do not believe that, on the whole, the participants seek to re-establish a Yugoslav state or indeed wish to say that Yugoslavia as a state was a positive phenomenon. The participants wish to reclaim their right to discuss their personal and social history, which to a greater or lesser extent

happened to have taken place within the context of this state – and by doing so to re-establish a continuity of their life stories.

The *Lexicon* is an ongoing, internet-based project, and further physical editions will be amended to include subsequent additions online. The project offers an opportunity for the necessary public discussions to take place in all former Yugoslav states about what Yugoslavia, Yugoslavs and Yugoslav culture were and are, how they relate to the national(ist) (re)constructions of the new states, what former Yugoslav citizens wish to keep from this period of their history, and what they may need to remember but wish to discard in this post-Yugoslav time. The *Lexicon* offered the first real opportunity for a democratic, honest, cross-border and inter-ethnic discussion of their common social history; history that took place under the umbrella of the Yugoslav state. As such, the *Lexicon* was, and still is, a valuable starting point for reconciliation.

Popular Music

The second example of the power of popular culture in aid of reconciliation is a popular music example: the recent concerts of Bijelo Dugme held in June 2005. I will briefly elaborate on who Bijelo Dugme were and why their recent farewell concerts were a particularly significant – although not isolated – example of popular music moving people towards reconciliation.

Bijelo Dugme, or ‘White Button’ (the literal English translation) formed in Sarajevo in 1974. They were the first band to blend Western and local musical forms in Yugoslavia, and became arguably the biggest Yugoslav band of all time – it has been suggested more than once that they were the Yugoslav equivalent of the Beatles. Bijelo Dugme ‘drew unabashedly on ethnic melodies and succeeded, in the process, in giving a “Yugoslav” stamp to rock music’.⁹

Although Yugo-rock often blended folk melodies, it was generally, however, an urban phenomenon, whose major centres were Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo.¹⁰ Gordy argues that these cities:

[a]ll developed strong local musical scenes, in intensive contact with one another. As a rule, popular bands made their records, and often built their publics, more successfully in other republics than at home.¹¹

Yugoslavia’s record companies were set up as state-owned but market-oriented enterprises, leading to ‘arguably, the strongest popular music market in Eastern Europe’.¹² The major companies were Jugoton (Zagreb), PGP RTB (Belgrade) and Diskoton (Sarajevo).¹³ Rasmussen notes that ‘the national radio network adopted representative diversity as the core principle of its programming policies’, including an increasing amount of Euro-American music.¹⁴ This policy encouraged the blending of regional musical forms across regions and with global Western trends. Sabrina Ramet notes that ‘[r]ock music in Yugoslavia ... has reflected rock trends worldwide’, arguing that all the major styles witnessed in the West were also replicated in Yugoslavia.¹⁵ By 1982, according to a survey done by *Rock* magazine, 2,874 amateur and professional groups were in existence.¹⁶ By 1987, an international label manager for RTB PGP Records estimated there were 30–50 professional bands and as many as 5,000 amateur

bands in a state of 20 million people.¹⁷ By the end of the 1980s, rock culture was firmly planted in the mainstream.

As Yugoslavia started to disintegrate, rock and roll culture, intensely inter-urban and cosmopolitan, suffered heavily. Yugoslav rock music went from a centre-stage position in the 1980s Yugoslavia to the periphery of cultural space in the new states. Gordy argues that:

[T]he breakdown of contact between urban centres caused the rock and roll market, which was always inter-urban, to virtually disappear. What the establishment of borders did not achieve in this regard, the exodus of the younger generation across the borders did.¹⁸

Through the creation of new borders and the mass exodus of urban youth, the audiences dwindled and urban rock scenes lost their critical mass, becoming even weaker under attack from nationalist cultural policies. Bijelo Dugme ceased to exist with the break up of Yugoslavia. Yugoslav rock music became marginalised in the post-1990 period over the whole region of the former Yugoslavia.

In both Croatia and Serbia, folk, rather than rock, tended to be used as an expression of the soul of the nation. The nation itself was in both cases considered to be more authentically represented in the village than in the city, further distancing the nationalist movements from urban culture and rock music. As urban culture and rock music retreated into the margins of public life, they increasingly came to represent the multicultural Yugoslav identity.

The diminishing availability of Yugoslav rock through the usual forms of distribution created the conditions for the creation of alternative distribution channels. Gordy notes:

Although the demise of SFRY physically isolated the urban audiences of Yugoslavia's republics from one another, music continued to make its way through borders. A brisk bootleg trade assured that recordings remained available, if only to a limited public.¹⁹

The artists showed 'improbable tolerance' for the pirating practices in the 1990s, in all probability realising that no other legitimate avenues for dissemination were available for their music in any case during this period.²⁰

Many commentators on the phenomenon of Yugo rock – or Yugo-music in general – on the internet noticed that the websites and forums were rarely divided along ethnic lines or newly established borders.

If there exists even a segment where, at least on occasion, it may appear that the SFRY still exists, then it's the virtual space of the world's internet. The content on the net that relates to the yugo-music is difficult to distinguish by national or geographic belonging.²¹

This phenomenon illustrates how, even at the height of ethnic tensions, music had the ability to bring former Yugoslavs together.

In 2000, the situation started to change in a significant way. The arrest of Slobodan Milošević, the death of Tudjman and even the death of Izetbegović meant that all the three major actors of the war years and the Dayton Accord

were no longer on the post-Yugoslav political scene, offering the first real opportunity for change since the end of armed conflict.

In terms of the music scene, this enabled many bands – for the first time since the start of the war – to start touring the region. Bands that were well-established before the war reclaimed their audiences in parts of the region to which they could not tour during the war years. The trickle has, over time, become more of a flood, and it is now reasonable once again to discuss a single Ex-Yu music scene. Not only bands in search of a wider audience, but also audiences themselves will routinely travel between former Yugoslav republics, usually to see their favourite performers or attend music festivals, such as the annual *Exit* festival in Novi Sad.

Earlier this year, members of Bijelo Dugme announced that three farewell concerts would take place – in Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade. The very locations of the concerts were symbolic – the three cities, now in three different countries, were Yugoslav music centres and were all equally Bijelo Dugme’s audience. Audiences greeted the news with wild enthusiasm – tickets sold out within hours of becoming available in all three cities. In total, over a quarter of a million people attended the concerts. The concerts, and the enthusiasm with which people attended – often crossing borders to do so – signal an important change in people’s attitudes both to their common past and to each other. This could never have happened in 1996. Although there is a long way to go, attendances at these concerts show that some progress has actually been made.

Yugonostalgia

Having given these two examples in the arena of popular culture, I think it is necessary to expand a little on the basis on which these popular cultural phenomena have often been dismissed: namely that they are nostalgic, or ‘Yugonostalgic’. The term, unsurprisingly, came into existence in the post-1990 post-Yugoslav world. ‘Yugonostalgia’ – or as a label, a ‘Yugonostalgic’ – is a composition of two words: ‘Yugoslavia’ and ‘nostalgia’. I will briefly discuss this term and hopefully make a case that as far as reconciliation is concerned, nostalgia can be a constructive phenomenon.

Janover suggests a plural version, *nostalgias*, instead of the singular *nostalgia* to describe ‘those afflictions in which we are sick of our places, our times, ourselves’ and through which we long ‘for another time, another place, another self’.²² He argues that suffering nostalgias ‘involves a certain kind of self-fracturing’, launching ‘ironic retrievals of the past that can serve as critical measures of the present but in conscious awareness that there can be no return.’²³ He argues that ‘these longings to be elsewhere, to become different to what one is, can also be the retracting lenses of constructive critique’.²⁴ Janover asserts that ‘in the imaginative duration of nostalgia we rediscover memory ... as unexplored potentialities of past experiences’.²⁵

Janover therefore contends that in remembering the past, we also remember *what could have been* and, through recognising these unrealised paths, we can impact on the present. In the case of Yugo-nostalgia, the phenomenon is implicitly

a critique of current socio-political realities in which former Yugoslavs now live. Yugo-nostalgia is implicitly an affirmation that recent history could have been different, that the path taken was not the only possible one. It is precisely because these phenomena are a critique of current circumstances that they have often been greeted with such strong reactions from the ruling elites.

It is significant enough that all ex-citizens of former Yugoslavia, regardless of political allegiances or national identification, are well-acquainted with the term, suggesting that the phenomenon with which it is associated is less than a rare occurrence. It has been well covered in the newspapers, from Belgrade to Split, and suggests that some people still identify with aspects of former Yugoslavia.²⁶ Ugrešić wrote 'the terms Yugoslav, Yugo-nostalgic or Yugo-zombie are synonyms with national traitor'.²⁷ They are used, she elaborates:

[A]s a political and moral disqualification, the Yugo-nostalgic is a suspicious person, a 'public enemy' a 'traitor', a person who regrets the collapse of Yugoslavia, Yugo-nostalgic is the enemy of democracy. The term Yugo-nostalgia belongs to the new terminology of war.²⁸

Yugo-nostalgia is a term that has been applied to any reference of Yugoslavia that is not derogatory, any comment that might suggest that there was anything worthwhile created under the auspices of that state that is worth preserving.

What, if anything, was worth preserving? Ugrešić outlines the problem of precisely identifying this:

The ordinary, fearful citizen of Former Yugoslavia, when trying to explain the simplest things, gets entangled in a net of humiliating footnotes. Yes, Yugoslavia, but the former Yugoslavia, not this Yugoslavia of Milošević's ... Yes, nostalgia, perhaps you could call it that, but you see, not for Milošević, but for that ... former Yugoslavia ... For the former communist Yugoslavia?! No, not the state, not for communism ... For what, then? It's hard to explain, you see ... Do you mean for that singer, for Djordje Balašević, then?! Yes, for the singer ... But that Balašević of yours is a Serb, isn't he?!²⁹

Ugrešić perceptively notes that while people express feelings of longing and identification for aspects of former Yugoslavia, it is much harder for them to articulate what exactly is it about Yugoslavia that warrants attachment. 'V', a participant on one forum, went into a lengthy explanation of what Yugo-nostalgia meant to her:

Yugo-nostalgia is my emotional relationship to one part of my life ... Of course we cannot go back to the way it used to be, but we can close the Pandora's box of hate that others opened, and to who we didn't stand up sufficiently [the nationalists]. Yugo-nostalgia is my emotional relationship not towards the territory of one country, but towards the people who lived in it (before they all went mad and sent everything to the devil).³⁰

V raises a number of points, the most striking being the orientation of her feelings towards the past into a hope of action for the future. She, like many other former Yugoslavs online, discounts the importance of state and territory, affirming that what was really important in former Yugoslavia was the existence of informal, interpersonal networks that created the Yugoslav community.

Teofil Pančić, in his article in *Vreme*, offered the term 'normalnostalgia' as more pertinent than Yugonostalgia, and I am inclined to agree.³¹ It is this desire for a normalisation of life that compels people to wish to revisit the last period of 'normality' they experienced, as they perceive it. I would suggest that as life normalises in post-Yugoslav states, and relationships between ethnic groups improve, the need for and the function of Yugonostalgia will fade. Yugonostalgia is therefore not only a symptom of a malady that only reconciliation can cure (although that it certainly is); it also provides an *opportunity*, an entry point, where reconciliation can begin.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that a number of pop cultural developments, of which I could briefly discuss only two examples, signal a normalisation of relations on an interpersonal and informal level. To some extent, as one writer recently told me, such informal projects and relationships were and could be built precisely because the state was not involved. All they required of the state was that it didn't actively stand in the way of their initiatives.

These informal developments also have the potential to 'filter up' the ladder to impact on more formal, governmental and intergovernmental interactions. I would argue that recent moves by the Croatian and Serbian Presidents to apologise for war-time atrocities and to make very strong statements in support of reconciliation are partly a result, not a cause, of grassroots changes of attitude in their respective state populations.³² Politicians, after all, are inclined to nurture their political careers and re-election prospects. While reconciliation certainly cannot be achieved in the arena of popular culture alone, it might be wise to broaden the focus of reconciliation research to also include popular culture as both a tool for reconciliation and as a barometer of its progress.

Endnotes

¹ D. Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, Phoenix, London, 1998, p. 232.

² G. Jordan and C. Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race, and the Postmodern World*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p. 8.

³ S.P. Ramet, 'Rock: The Music of Revolution (and Political Conformity)' in S.P. Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, p. 5.

⁴ The initial call for participation can now also be found at the current *Lexicon of Yu Mythology* website: <<http://www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net/original.php>>, accessed 9 August 2005.

⁵ D. Ugrešić, Amsterdam, *Lexicon of Yu Mythology Website* (old version), 23 July 1999, <http://www.geocities.com/yu_leksikon/> accessed 1 October 2005.

⁶ M. Stojić Wilson-Max, 'A contribution to the list', *Ibid.*, 2 April 1998.

⁷ M. Vojniković, 'By letter, by letter', *Ibid.* 26 February 2001.

⁸ *Ibid.*

- ⁹ S.P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia From the Death of Tito to Insurrection in Kosovo*, 3rd ed., Westview Press, Boulder, 1999, p. 96.
- ¹⁰ E. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, University Park, 1999, p. 109; S.P. Ramet, 'Shake, Rattle, and Self-Management: Making the Scene in Yugoslavia' in S.P. Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, p. 105.
- ¹¹ E. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, p. 109.
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- ¹⁵ S.P. Ramet, 'Shake, Rattle, and Self-Management: Making the Scene in Yugoslavia', p. 101.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ E. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, p. 114.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- ²⁰ E. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, p. 114.
- ²¹ D. Katilović, 'Yugonostalgia Without Borders', *NIN*, 6 December 2001, <<http://www.nin.co.yu/2001-12/06/20943.html>>, accessed 26 June 2002.
- ²² M. Janover, 'Nostalgias', *Critical Horizons*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2001, p. 115.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ²⁶ Examples include: D. Vukorepa, Interview with Filip Sovagovic, actor and writer, 'We are Young Sheep', *Feral Tribune*, Split, http://store.feral.hr/feral/1998/691/intervju_4.html, accessed 1 June 2002.
- V. Tucan, 'Everyday Life: Yugonostalgia', *Republika*, no. 150, 15–31 October 1996, <<http://www.yurope.com/zines/republika/arhiva/96/150/150-24.html>>, accessed 1 June 2002.
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²⁷ D. Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, p. 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³⁰ 'V', 'Yugonostalgia as Cowardice', <<http://6yka.com/forum>>, accessed 26 June 2002.