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Post-Yugoslav Collective Memory Between National and Transnational Myths

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the image of Yugoslavia in the collective memories of the post-Yugoslav societies. The author of this text, basing on an assumption that every society has a great number of collective memories, highlights the fact that among the Balkan nations one can find both supporters and opponents not only of the SFRY but also of the idea of the cooperation among the Southern Slavs. Both positive and negative opinions of Yugoslavia in the collective memories are based not on the sober assessment of the historical facts but on collective emotions and historical and political myths. The anti-Yugoslav discourse is primarily based on the national mythology. The discourse of the supporters of the Yugoslav tradition on the other hand, goes back in a large extent to the transnational myths. By discussing these two types of ideas about Yugoslavia, the author of this text tries to show their impact on the current political decisions.

Keywords: *collective memory; Yugoslavia; myth; collective identity; Yugo-nostalgia*

Collective memory – a category once reserved only for historians – today becomes the subject of an interdisciplinary debate in the field of humanities and social science, including political science. At least since early 1990s of the twentieth century one can notice a growing number of conferences, projects and publications devoted to this particular subject (Berek, 2009, p. 9–11). Chris Lorenz describes this process as the *memory boom* (Lorenz, 2010, p. 83) others call it *mnemonic turn*, Anna Wolff-Powęska (2011, p. 45) speaks about the *inflation of the memory*. The interdisciplinary *Memory studies* are becoming more and more popular around the world. *Memory studies* is also the title of a periodical, published since 2008, in which texts of representatives of

various scientific disciplines are published. As Wolff-Powęska (2011, p. 44) notices, the growing interest of memory is a result of the cultural and political changes. Others explain that the revival of the debate on the topic of memory is a belated reaction to the injustice of modernity (Kudela, 2008, p. 13).

Because of the limited length of this text the deeper analysis of the phenomenon of the memory cannot be presented. Some of its features however, essential for conducting the argument about the forms of the post-Yugoslav collective memories, will be highlighted. The author of this text treats the collective memory as a part of collective representations defined by Jan Berting (2006, p. 83) as “common mental images” or as the “mental maps of the social scene”. It is not difficult to notice that the visions of the past will be a part of that kind of collection of images or of the mental map. These visions however must comply with the shapes of the collective representations.

In the source literature there is a consensus as to the fact that the collective memory is organized by the moderators of the collective space called by Pierre Bourdieu as *symbolic power holders* (politicians, intellectuals, journalists, artists, clergymen). Wulf Kansteiner (2002, p. 180) introduced the famous distinction between *memory makers* and *memory consumers*, between those who create the memory and those who are given its specific version. Łukasz Skoczylas (2014, p. 16–17) on the other hand writes about the *memory leaders* and the *memory recipients*. Thus the researchers, regardless of the terminology, underline that the shapes of the collective memory are the result of the work of a group of intellectuals or – as Lech Nijakowski (2013, p. 238–239) calls them – experts.

What is more, the collective memory corrects the individual one. Human memories wear off very quickly and it is then when the collective memory helps to recall them but, of course, in a self-imposed form (Maruszewski, 2016, p. 16). Yet another fundamental feature of the collective memory which should not be forgotten is its total dependency on the political and ideological context. If – as it was noticed – the shapes of the collective memory are being moulded by its leaders then without a doubt the actions of these people, namely enriching historical facts with specific symbolic meaning, are guided by a certain political interest or ideology with which they identify (Gasztold-Seń, 2015, p. 139; Kuligowski, 2007, p. 86–89). That is one of the reasons why the collective memory is not objective but can be described as selective and susceptible to manipulation. In his work Tarik Jusić (2008, p. 54–58) notices that the adoption to the memory frames must be accompanied by the processes of selection, positioning and omission.

Opinions suggesting that there might be a phenomenon that can be called the collective memory of a society appear in numerous debates. Such ideas are being discussed regarding the topic of Polish, French, Serbian or Croatian collective memory.

It seems however that these opinions may not be accurate as in every society – despite enacting the official state version of the narrative of the past (Kieres, 2009, p. 88–89) – divisions come forward and each and every group has its own collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 2008) wrote about the memory of religious groups, families and social classes. One can add to this collective memories of local groups, minorities or generations (Ślawska, 2013, p. 42). Representatives of various fields are fascinated with each one of them, what makes them the subject of scientific inquiry. It is not an entirely new phenomenon, as A. Wolff-Powęska (2011, p. 36) noticed: “The competing against each other memory cultures of different kinds of social, ethnic and religious environments have a long tradition”. This should be seen as an important fact because in the further part of this text the author would like to show that there is more than one memory about Yugoslavia; that on the one hand there are many supporters of the south-Slavic idea of unity and closeness, but then the hatred towards SFRY is so strong that referring to the nationalistic slogans appears to be the easiest and the most comfortable strategy to win the political support and the elections as well.

Looking at today’s thoughts about Yugoslavia or – broadly speaking – at the idea of the common state of the Southern Slavs it is hard not to get the impression that two parallel visions of reality coexist right next to each other. The dissent on the idea of the federation usually goes hand in hand with displaying the national mythology directed against the neighbourhood countries. Although its boiling point dates back to the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century one should remember that its roots reach as far as the nineteenth century when the fashion for national revival movements could be clearly visible on the Balkan Peninsula. Paradoxically more less at the same time the thought of integration rooted in Pan-Slavism and in the Slavic myth had flourished. This dualism of national-separatist and unification trends (Bobrownicka, 1995, p. 22) lasts up till now, however the national and transnational myths on which the trends are based were repeatedly modified and adapted to current realities.

The insights of a Slovenian researcher of culture Mitja Velikonja, who uses the term of *new Yugoslavism* (*novi jugoslavizam*) to refer to the discourse about Yugoslavia, seem to be useful in terms of further considerations in this text. “I understand the new Yugoslavism as an extensive, multi-layered, schizophrenic and conflictual ideology which is born both inside the current borderlines and outside them and which refers to Yugoslavia” (Velikonja, 2012, p. 84). By accepting this definition Velikonja seems to admit that one is dealing with chaotic thoughts and that there is no shortage of arguments that exclude each other. Velikonja makes a distinction between positive and negative Yugoslavism, explaining that in each of the post-Yugoslavian societies these two discourses coexist next to each other and that the critical attitude towards the former state applies to the nostalgic attitudes and proposals to strengthen the

regional cooperation. Thus it can be said that the imaginary Yugoslavia – seen both positively and negatively – is constructed very freely, on the base on selectively chosen facts and completed theses.

Although Velikonja's concept of *novi jugoslavizam* refers both to the external and internal sphere, this text is limited only to the post-Yugoslav area and its main purpose is to present the two forms of post-Yugoslav collective memory. The author of this text believes that both of the already mentioned narratives about the common state interpenetrate each other. One of the fundamental features of nostalgia (and thus also so called Yugo-nostalgia) is its selectiveness which means that people do not long for the whole state and its system but for the chosen parts of its reality. This seems to be a good explanation for the fact that many of the Yugoslavian critics appear to be, sometimes only in certain situations, glorifying the chosen aspects of the state like full employment, public order, freedom to travel, sport achievements or the bigger importance of the country in the international arena.

As an example of this kind of surprising as it seems connection of positive and negative opinions about the Yugoslavian project one can refer to an interview given in 2015 by a Serbian writer (and politician) Vuk Drašković to a web portal *Priznajem Jugoslaven sam (I admit, I am a Yugoslav)* in which he stated that “Had it not been killed, Yugoslavia would now be one of the most important countries in the European Union” He also states that “there would be a place for Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia, Greater Bosnia and Greater Slovenia” (Pisac Vuk Drašković...). Not having enough space to fully introduce Vuk Drašković, the author of this text would like to remind that his works place him among romantic-national memory leaders. Although Drašković tried to combine pro-European slogans with strong nationalism, he will rather be remembered as the one whose novels (e.g. *Knjefe*) contributed to the expansion of the Serbian national chauvinism at the end of the twentieth century. It is worth explaining that Slobodan Milošević also portrayed himself as the defender of Yugoslavia. In his visions, however, the Yugoslavian project coincided with the idea of the Greater Serbia (Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, 2008, p. 119,126). This ideas are hinted by the author of this text only to highlight that the memory leaders manipulate the myths (in this case national and international myths) freely in order to secure themselves public support.

The growing positive valuation of Yugoslavia in the collective memory of the Balkan societies can be noticed since year 2000 when Serbia and Croatia underwent political changes the result of which was overthrowing the parties ruling from the 90s of the twentieth century. What is more, the experts of the phenomenon of memory believe that the feeling of longing for the old times does not appear just after the end of the turning point. According to them, developing the feeling takes some

time. However, it has to be noted that Yugo-nostalgia – although of course in much lower extent than today – was born just after the disintegration of SFRY as a big number of people, especially those belonging to the intellectual and cultural elites or children of mixed marriages, could not be reconciled with the destruction of the state with which they identified themselves. It is worth recalling that in the census of 1991, seven hundred and ten thousand people declared themselves to be Yugoslavs what was about three per cent of the population of the federation (Pavković, 2014, p. 309). In 1989 – so at the time when Yugoslavia still officially existed – a group of intellectuals declaring themselves as Yugoslavs (Dubravka Ugrešić, Dejan Kršić, Ivan Molek) took the initiative to preserve the common heritage of the disintegrating community (Pauker, 2006, 73–74). Initially it was carried out on-line, later in 2004 it was published as book and finally in 2011 it reached the stage in a form of a play directed by Oliver Frljić.

In 1994, so at the time when the war raged in the already former Yugoslavia, an issue of a monthly magazine “Literatura na świecie” titled Yugo-nostalgia was published. In this issue among the excerpts of authors admitting to longing for the destroyed state one could find a fascinating essay written by a translator, Magdalena Petryńska, titled “*Shortened*” *motherland* in which she wrote: “from the very beginning Yugo-nostalgics are opposed the war, xenophobia and national mythology (...) they support the civil society (Petryńska, 1994, p. 324). For some it may seem that writers or poets are individuals often alienated from the society whose voice – although interesting – remains rather aloof. Meanwhile many experts on the subject admit that writers next to politicians and journalists are amongst the most important memory leaders. Agata Jawoszek seems to be right by stating that literature is one of the best means of creating and modifying the collective memory (Jawoszek, 2014, p. 188–189).

While at that time Yugonostalgia was seen as a marginal phenomenon, characteristic for people of culture, who additionally were of leftist views contrary to right-winged nationalist memory leaders willing to serve in affirming the newly-created national identities, eventually it began to show that more often among a growing number of people Yugoslavia to a lesser or greater extend was judged positively. Of course the image of Yugoslavia in the collective memory is not consistent which should not be surprising as researchers dealing with the phenomenon prove that it can be characterized as trans-ideological, and that it is a mixture of different ideologies (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 1999). Besides, today it is often said that in the twenty-first century one should rather speak about the post-ideology, understood as disappearance of traditional ideological division (Klepec, 2013, p. 12).

The Yugoslavian idea thus the project of South-Slavic unification was based – similarly to panslavism – on the myth of the primal unity of Slavs (Majerek, 2011, p. 47).

Lilla Moroz-Grzelak highlights the fact that the visions of community helped the small nations to believe that they can – together of course – play a significant role (Moroz-Grzelak, 2011; p. 285). And although one of the incarnations of this doctrine was Josip Broz Tito's slogan of *brotherhood and unity*, the fact is that identifying the concepts of integration with the communist system is inaccurate. However such simplifications are being overused by the leaders of the anti-Yugoslavian collective memories.

Today, one can often meet with the views that although the communism (even in its Yugoslavian “soft” version) was wrong, the bigger state had a significant potential of which today's small succession countries can only dream. One has to remember that the Yugoslavian identity did not exclude the national one as people have a big or even an infinite number of identities. The words of a Slovenian writer Drago Jančar go along perfectly with this as at the moment of the disintegration of the federation he stated that he will regret living only with Slovenians (Purchla, 2012, p. 1). A larger country meant having access to its own sea, to its own mountains, to a bigger number of national parks but it also meant having larger markets, audience and bigger number of readers (Debeljak, 2012; p. 217–218). An average person recalls above all the social security and financial stability which today in the midst of a permanent crisis is of particular importance. The author of this text would like to remind that nostalgia is a specific narration about the past written from the perspective of the presence thus it idealizes those aspects which today do not work as well as they should.

Balkanists do not deny the fact that Yugo-nostalgia manifests itself fully in the socio-cultural layer. Some mention even the revival of Yugoslavia in the sphere of culture. This should not be surprising as the desire to reach beyond the native small audience means becoming noticed in the region. But more aspects seem to be gaining importance in the cultural cooperation. The prolonged economic crisis has proven to be one of the factors stimulating the economic cooperation. The work on common supranational offers and projects benefits from the development of tourism. In his famous essay from 2009 while observing this phenomenon and forecasting its growth, a British journalist Tim Judah defined the revival of regional links through the term *Yugosphere* what caused violent reactions from the adversaries of the community ideas. There were even conspiracy theories that the West (including in particular the United Kingdom) has a secret plan to restore Yugoslavia (Tajni plan...). Despite this, the post-Yugoslavian cooperation managed to reach the political dimension, related primarily to the regional cooperation which was in favour of accessing to the EU, similarly as it once happened in the case of the Visegrad Group. However, recently the last of the mentioned aspects of the *Yugosphere* cooperation is going through a serious crisis connected to the political tensions in the region, which will be discussed further in this text (Judah, 2008).

While looking at the discourse of the Yugo-nostalgia one can come across Marxist, anti-nationalist and anti-fascist slogans. On the basis of “brotherhood and unity” initiatives aiming at reconciliation and forgetting about the wave of evil from the 90s are being created. The positive valorisation of the Yugoslav past is usually associated with the pro-EU communities. This should not be surprising when one considers the fact that amongst others, two of the conditions set during the annexation process to the EU are: building the atmosphere of trust in the region and cooperating with the Hague Tribunal. It is also highlighted that the cooperation in the area of Western Balkans is in line with the EU’s trend of supporting regionalisms and regional cooperation for development (Ribić, 2007, p. 238). But paradoxically among the defenders of Yugoslavia, especially among those belonging to an elder generation, some anti-EU views can be heard as well. They are based on the often repeated belief that Yugoslavia was the precursor of the EU and that instead of joining the EU which is going through a crisis, it would be better to think of the revival of the south-Slav federation.

One should also underline the division of the nostalgia into the passive and the active one, which draws attention of many experts of the phenomenon of nostalgia such as Svetlana Boym (2001, p. 41–42). However, various terminology was proposed. Putting these debates aside it is worth highlighting that the passive nostalgia relates primarily to the elderly who limit themselves to idealizing the old times only in their dreams. The active nostalgia however, characteristic for the young and active people – even if the majority of them did not live in the era they yearn for, entails the desire to change the world (Markovina, 2015, p. 12–13). With this in mind many analysts saw the huge driving force in Yugo-nostalgia. Moreover, they counted it as hope and a chance for reconciliation in the region.

But as it has already been mentioned, other images of the Yugoslav state function simultaneously. The term: “prison of nations” is often being used. Such visions of collective memory based on nationalism, national myths and national stereotypes stand in opposition to the idea of multiculturalism. This favours the hate speech to spread in the area, which can be described as the borderland or/and the ethnic mosaic (Husanović, 2010, p. 101–103). Since the breakup of the federation the ethnocentrically oriented groups apply the same strategy of rejecting everything Yugoslav by labelling it as anti-national, non-patriotic and thus immoral (Petrović, 2012, p. 127). Negative attitudes towards Yugoslavia often go hand in hand with the criticism of the European integration what was particularly evident in Croatia during the campaign before the accession referendum, when some circles argued that EU is in fact the new embodiment of Yugoslavia and that Zagreb freed itself from Belgrade in order not to get enslaved again this time by Brussels (Czerwiński, 2012, p. 224). But also among the proponents of the European integration gazing upon the West and

upon the liberal economic model one can meet with criticism towards the socialist experiences (Kuljić 2011, p. 43).

Ivana Spasić analysed both the positive and the negative memory about Yugoslavia in Serbian society. It seems that her observations could provide a reference point for the entire region. According to her, the warm attitude towards Yugoslavia is characteristic for the majority of the liberal, pro-European and cosmopolite elites as well as for a small part of the nationalist elites. The critical attitude towards Yugoslavia is manifested by the Orthodox Church, its associated environments and converts – former officials of the Yugoslav state apparatus, today's adherents of the national-romantic mythology (Spasić, 2013, p. 205).

As it has been already mentioned, the experts of the region expected a lot witnessing increase in the regional cooperation. They saw in it the hope of stabilizing the political situation. Meanwhile, recently tensions began to arise between the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Of course, disputes among Balkan neighbours are nothing new, but this time plenty of them arose at once. It is enough to mention the frictions in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the referendum announced by the Serb Republic on the introduction of their national holiday; disputes of Kosovo and Montenegro concerning the demarcation of the borders; or an avalanche of incidents between Zagreb and Belgrade which scale is so large that journalists began to talk about the “Balkan cold war”.

Analysts explain that these mentioned tensions occur due to the scheduled for this year parliamentary elections in Croatia and Macedonia and local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But in search for explanations one should ask why Balkan politicians look for the nationalist rhetoric as the easiest way to secure the support of the electorate. In other words, the question why the national and not the transnational myths reach the statistic voter more easily seems interesting. Not having enough space for a deeper analyses of that problem the author of this text will point out only few of the most important factors.

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for the persistence of nationalist moods is the disastrous economic situation. The same reason is being mentioned by the analysts in the process of explaining the popularity of the separatist slogans in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Wölfel, 2016). Researchers are also trying to locate the events taking place in the Balkan region in a broader, European context pointing at the same time at the continental tendency for the so called right-wing turn. An attempt to explain the victory of HDZ in the parliamentary elections in Croatia from September 2016 is based on this tendency (Tanner, 2016). But the key issue here seems to be taking into consideration yet another factor, namely the disappointment with the European Union (Pešić, 2012 p. 254). If the Balkan societies, or at least their pro-European circles,

expected a lot after the accession to the EU, then the case of Croatia showed that this political step does not translate into financial benefits. It should also be added that Brussels plunged into crisis could not provide its newest member with any significant funds, as it had happened e. g. in the case of Poland. The question if indeed the EU should be seen as the only possible direction had been raised more often in the Balkan region. The concepts of the search for alternative routes correspond with the analysed in this text parallel of integration and disintegration processes.

If the regional cooperation in the area of Western Balkans is being presented on the one hand as an opportunity for the economical exchange and as the most obvious outlet markets and on the other as a chance for strengthening of the political role then it becomes obvious that highlighting the national and ethnic stereotypes does not help in building good neighbourhood relationships thus such slogans have to go hand in hand with suggestions to find other partners. While it is not surprising that in this case Serbs mention Russia, Croats – the United States and Bosnians – Turkey, the fact that the Balkan politicians seek for new directions such as China, Japan, United Arab Emirates, India, South America or North Africa might be interesting. Paradoxically such proposals meet with the approval from the part of Yugo-nostalgia who see in them a reference to the Non-Aligned Movement in which a major role was played by Josip Broz Tito.

Thus without a doubt one could claim that in the collective memory of the post-Yugoslav societies there is no single narrative about the common state, that negative and positive assessments coexist. Both visions of the past however are based on the myths and collective emotions and not on the factual substantive debate. This should not be surprising since if one wants to treat the collective memory as a part of the collective representations then they in turn appear to be extremely irrational and prone to manipulation from the outside. Some years back Paweł Śpiewak noticed that the debate on the past is possible (ignoring the debates of the professionals) only between people free from hatred who can afford to understand and asses their own actions (Śpiewak, 2005, p. 177). In other words the image of Yugoslavia in the collective memories can only undergo further mythologisation as the easiest way for the politicians to secure the support of the people is to refer to the collective emotions. Meanwhile, as it has been shown in the text, Yugoslavia understood as Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire* awakes various emotions also the most extreme ones.

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