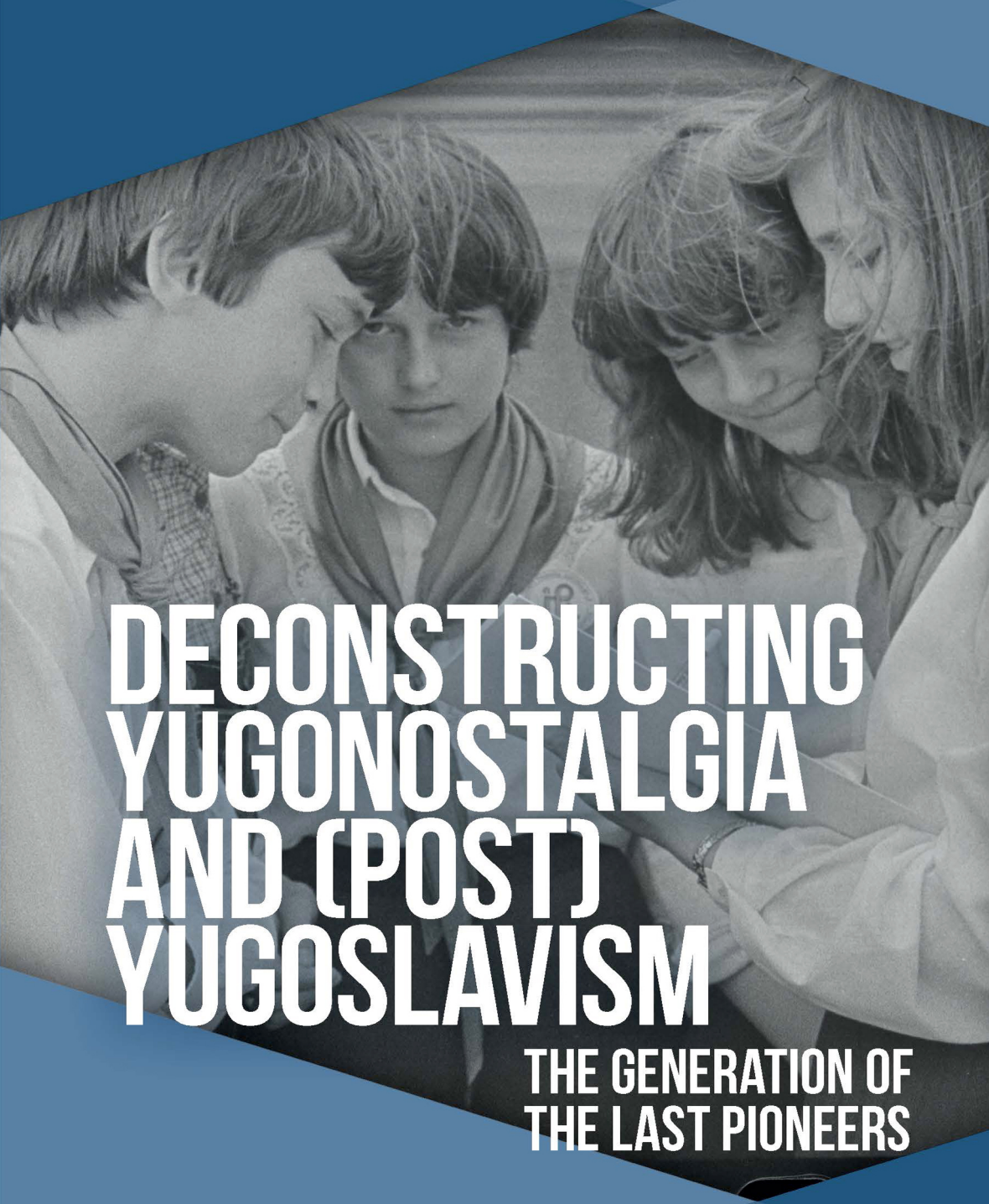
Critical Approaches to Southeast Europe



DECONSTRUCTING YUGONOSTALGIA AND (POST) YUGOSLAVISM

THE GENERATION OF THE LAST PIONEERS

Milica Popović

CEU PRESS

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To my generation of the last pioneers,
and to Eva, and the hope new generations bring

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List of Abbreviations

AFŽ	*Antifašistički front žena*	Women's Antifascist Front
AVNOJ	*Antifašističko veće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*	Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia
DEMOS	*Demokratična opozicija Slovenije*	Democratic Opposition of Slovenia
EU	European Union	
FNRJ	*Federativna narodna republika Jugoslavija*	Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia
HDZ	*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*	Croatian Democratic Union
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia	
JNA	*Jugoslovenska narodna armija*	Yugoslav People's Army
MP	Member of Parliament	
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	
NDH	*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*	Independent State of Croatia
NGO	nongovernmental organization	
NOB	*Narodno oslobodilačka borba*	People's Liberation Struggle
NYSA	New Yugoslav Studies Association	
RSK	*Republika Srpska Krajina*	Republic of Srpska Krajina
SANU	*Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti*	Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
SDP	*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*	Social Democratic Party of Croatia
SDS	*Slovenska demokratska stranka*	Slovenian Democratic Party
SDSS	*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*	Independent Democratic Serb Party
SFRJ	*Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija*	Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia
SNS	*Srpska napredna stranka*	Serbian Progressive Party
SPS	*Socijalistička partija Srbije*	Socialist Party of Serbia
UDBA	*Uprava državne bezbednosti*	Directorate for State Security
UN	United Nations	
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force	
WWII	World War Two	

Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in the making, since 2010. Once I decided to write a doctoral thesis, I simply wanted to tell the story of a generation, my generation. The book in front of you is the final result of this attempt: most certainly, an incomplete one. My deepest gratitude goes to all of the last pioneers[1]: the interviewees who generously trusted me with their life stories and opened their hearts to share their thoughts, emotions, and reflections with me, but also all of my acquaintances, friends, friends of friends, colleagues, far too many to be named here, who shared their information, contacts, and advice, but also their couches, food, and, when needed, drinks. Without such a strong generational and Yugoslav bond, this book would never have come into existence.

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1 I have decided to keep the word "pioneers" in lowercase, in order to replicate more faithfully the form it would take in the (post)Yugoslav languages.

academic work. After my graduation, a wonderful community largely came together under the umbrella of the New Yugoslav Studies Association; they continued inspiring me to make this book come to fruition, with special thanks going to Bojana Videkanić, an always encouraging comrade. I also wish to give a special thank you to the Memory Studies Association, which I have been so lucky to be a part of since the beginning, a group of brilliant minds and wonderful scholars: I would never have become a memory scholar—or any other scholar for that matter—without their support and encouragement. In particular, I would single out Michael Rothberg, whose work served as an inspiration and whose generosity as a friend continues to encourage. Andrew Mike Cragg has been an invaluable support going through many drafts of this manuscript, making my clumsy Slavic English readable. Comments by the reviewers helped the manuscript become the book in front of you, and I am deeply grateful for the constructive critiques that pushed me to do better, along with the support of my precious editor, Anthony Mason.

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Introduction

Abstract: The Introduction situates the book within debates on memory, nostalgia, and post-socialist transformation by foregrounding the lived experiences of the "last pioneers," the final generation socialized in socialist Yugoslavia. It outlines the central argument that (post)Yugoslavism persists as a generational identity distinct from (post)Yugonostalgia, which emerges as a set of political and discursive practices shaped by contemporary positionalities. By weaving a historical contextualization of Yugoslavia's rise and violent dissolution with theoretical reflections on memory, generation, and nostalgia, the Introduction establishes a framework for analyzing how personal life narratives intersect with political identities in the (post)Yugoslav space. It also clarifies the methodological approach and structure of the book, positioning it as an intervention in memory studies, postsocialist studies, and political sociology.

Keywords: Yugonostalgia; (post)Yugoslavism; generational memory; post-socialism; memory politics; (post)Yugoslav space

...but in the end there is always a bit of space that cannot be shared, a bit of life that cannot be translated, an experience which marked the shared life in a particular country, in a particular culture, in a particular system, at a particular historical moment. This unshareable layer in us is activated by a Pavlovian bell. And we salivate unfailingly, without really knowing why. That unknown space in us is something like a shared "childhood," the warm territory of communality of a group of people, a space reserved for future nostalgia. Particularly if it should happen that this space is violently taken from us.

Dubravka Ugrešić, "The Confiscation of Memory" (1996, 28)

If you happened to walk through Belgrade, between the presidential palace, the city hall, and the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, you would

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come across a park. This park retained its name from the socialist Yugoslav period: Pioneers' Park. In early March 2025, however, it became inaccessible. Overnight, in a hopeless battle that the neoliberal ethno-nationalist regime in Serbia waged against massive, months-long student protests, unidentified organized groups put up tents. Calling themselves "students who want to study" (in opposition to the students who led the protests and blockaded universities), despite the fact that the majority of them were not students at all, they supported Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia, and the ruling regime's Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS). In Pioneers' Park they built a settlement,[1] day by day, bringing in camping tents, army tents, tractors, mobile toilets, basketball nets, and sometimes even dangerous objects. The park, and slowly its surroundings, turned into a theater of the absurd. The chaos, and the somber pile of garbage which grew larger on a daily basis, became a grim landmark of the city's center—an unsettling mirror of the ruling regime.

I grew up just around the corner. As a kid, I would play in the park, as a teenager, walk my dog there, and as an adult, simply pass through it on my way to the city center. Just as once my becoming a pioneer was part of a normal life, so too were the daily visits to Pioneers' Park, until it was hijacked for the purposes of performative (post)Yugoslav politics. The occupation of Pioneers' Park by the ruling regime, illegally taking yet another public good away from the citizens, weighs all the heavier because of the park's name. It feels like another violent takeover of the socialist Yugoslav spaces of the past, for the purposes of a present decay, with the liberation as the horizon of a hopeful future; all symbolically intertwined with the destiny of the pioneers.

This book tells the story of Yugoslav memories and nostalgia among some of the political actors who are building our everyday political realities today: the last generation of pioneers.[2] The story is told in three layers. First, as a story about socialist Yugoslavia; second, as a story about a specific generation; and, third, as a story about how we relay our own (hi)stories and reconcile them with our politics. The meaning-making of our lives, embedded in political and generational positionalities, stands at the core of the ideological view of the world. As political actors engage in the public sphere, we often ask ourselves if, and how, their life narratives shape their political actions. This book brings to light the life narratives of the last pioneers, who today shape the political landscapes of Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia: arguing that

1 The settlement was known colloquially as "Ćacilend."

2 The generation of the last pioneers was born in socialist Yugoslavia between 1974 and 1982.

their generational positionality reinforces the existing (post)Yugoslavisms, while their political positionalities color the contents of their Yugonostalgias in the (post)Yugoslav space.[3] Identifying what Yugonostalgia means for them, and how—if at all—it interacts with their political identities, has been the central thread of my research for more than a decade. The pages that follow present the outcome of this long inquiry into my own generation—and into what ultimately happened to our pioneers' vows.

Socialist Yugoslavia: The Beginning and the End[4]

Yugoslavia was constituted as a state twice, first in 1918 and then again in 1945, once as a monarchy and the second time as a socialist republic.[5] Different historical legacies, state regimes, cultural traditions, and religious heritages were woven throughout the (post)Yugoslav space: there were myriad of different political entities and a multitude of political and ethno-national imagined identities.[6] In 1943, while the Second World War was still raging, the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) convened in Jajce, central Bosnia, to declare Yugoslavia a socialist federal republic. The country was fully liberated from Nazi occupation only in May 1945; the following year, the new Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ) was proclaimed, acknowledging five constituent nations: Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs, and Slovenes. Bosnian Muslims (today Bosniaks) gained the status of a nation only in the 1960s. Six republics and two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) were united under the central values of brotherhood and unity, and adoption of the socialist path toward communism. Other ethnic minorities, understood in the socialist Yugoslav period as "*narodnosti*"

3 "(Post)Yugoslav" in this book is used as a locational term, grounded in continuity. While the Yugoslav space persists as a locus, the prefix "post" marks a temporal shift without negating the ongoing continuity of space, heritage, culture, or shared communities. The term encompasses all seven states that were created as a result of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

4 The historical overview given here is a very general summary of the key elements for bringing a contextual framework to readers unacquainted with Yugoslav history; it does not in any way claim to be either comprehensive or complete. Please refer to the many cited works for further reading.

5 For a more comprehensive history of Yugoslavia and the wars, see Čalić 2018 and Baker 2015.

6 In this book, I use the term "ethno-national" to refer to imagined ethnic identity, in contrast to "nationality," which refers to state citizenship.

("nationalities"), gained recognition as well: Albanians, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and many others.[7] The legitimacy of the new regime was primarily based on the autochthonous antifascist struggle and wide support for the Communist Party. It was further strengthened following the final split between Tito and Stalin in 1948, turning Yugoslavia into a unique socialist country in Europe, fully independent of the Soviet Union and leaving complex consequences for further development of the country (Unkovski-Korica 2016).

Socialist Yugoslavia certainly had its dark moments and some tensions were never successfully resolved. Repressive episodes (such as the use of the Goli Otok prison camp for Stalinist supporters between 1949 and 1956); censorship policies, regardless of their inconsistency; the oft-criticized collectivization practices; and many other issues marked Yugoslav history. Regardless, the progress which the state brought to its population was unprecedented in the history of the area. The development of the country steadily continued after 1953, with an annual increase in industrial production between 1953 and 1960 of 13.83%—second only to Japan (Čalić 2013, 243)—although this development manifested unequally among the diverse republics.[8] Founding and leading the Non-Aligned Movement brought widespread international respect and a privileged diplomatic position to Yugoslavia, providing support as much as hope for the anticolonial movements across the world (Jakovina 2010; Stubbs 2023). After 1960, Yugoslavia was the only socialist state to abolish preventive censorship. In addition, its citizens were free to travel, and tourism was on the rise (Vučetić 2018a). The Constitution of 1946 contributed strongly to the advancement of women's position in Yugoslavia; to name just one example, it allowed women to own private property for the first time. As early as the 1950s, children born in and out of wedlock enjoyed equal rights. Women were allowed to keep their surname once married, and divorce and abortion were liberalized. Access to education was expanding: from just three universities in 1945, by 1980 there were 19 throughout the country.

In the 1960s, the state's economic strategy made workers' self-management the central policy line, and the state and the party were further decentralized. Still, these developments led to various contradictory consequences, including economic deterioration following the global economic crises (Musić 2021). In parallel with the world recession of the 1970s, right after

7 For more on the ambivalent relationship between the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the national question, see Čalić 2013 and Haug 2012.

8 On socialist economics in Yugoslavia, see Grdešić and Žitko 2026.

hopeful student protests in May 1968 (Klasić 2012), linguistic and ethno-nationalist debates flourished around the country. The state response to this multiplication of crises was the last Yugoslav constitution, adopted in 1974, proclaiming Tito as president for life and further decentralizing the federation. Ethno-nationalist tensions between the communist elites rose, repression from the state grew stronger, and censorship was again strengthened (Vučetić 2016).

Tito died in 1980. In 1981, student protests in Kosovo, demanding more autonomy, were met by strong state repression. By 1987, Slobodan Milošević, who would later be proclaimed the gravedigger of Yugoslavia, came to power in Serbia. That same year many scandals shook the country, most prominently the trials of the so-called Ljubljana Four for treason by betraying military secrets, in an article in the Slovenian weekly *Mladina*. The privatization processes started further damaging the socio-economic conditions in the country. By 1989, 500,000 workers in Yugoslavia were on strike, emerging as a reaction to the economic crisis and capitalist transformation of society led by International Monetary Fund–imposed austerity measures (Woodward 1995) and high unemployment rates, the highest of which was in Kosovo in 1990: 40.8% (Obradović 2017, 57). Led by the ethno-nationalist politics of Milošević, Serbia abolished the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina in 1989. In 1990, Slovenian delegates at the Fourteenth Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia left the session, never to return. Despite the attempts of then–Prime Minister Ante Marković, the economic decline continued and the country slid into chaos. Multiparty elections were held in 1990 in all of the Yugoslav republics, and in the majority of them, ethno-nationalist pro-capitalist politics won. In January 1992, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia fell apart.

There were a multitude of reasons for the dissolution,[9] the most convincing being embedded in Susan Woodward's understanding of a simultaneous "matter of domestic transformation and of the transformation of the European and international order" (Woodward 1995, 13). Indeed, just before 1989, it seemed that of all the Eastern and Central European countries, Yugoslavia was the closest to entering the European Community: an association agreement was in place and Yugoslavia was a member of the European Free Trade Association. As it was already a hybrid economic system which had been cultivating cultural, economic, and political linkages with the Western world since breaking with the Soviet Union in 1948, it was expected that the

9 See the particularly meticulous analysis of diverse explanations given in theory by Jasna Dragović-Soso (2008).

transformation to a full market economy and multiparty democracy would be somewhat smooth. What was overlooked was the difficult economic situation. In Woodward's analysis, this was largely the result of austerity measures implemented with the aim of resolving a foreign debt crisis that led to a constitutional and a political conflict before ultimately becoming a war (Woodward 1995, 15).

Despite the economic crises, and contrary to popular belief and the retroactive claims of the political elites, the ethno-national relations among the populations did not deteriorate: rather, they were deliberately undermined by those same elites. In the mid-1980s, almost 90% of the population believed interethnic relations in their environment were good, while interpolitical relations between the republics and within the party were bad (Goati 1986, 152–153). In 1985, in a public poll conducted among the youth, the majority declared that they primarily felt like Yugoslavs. This was especially true among Macedonian, Montenegrin, Muslim, and Serbian youth, with figures between 76% and 80%; the lowest Yugoslav sentiment was recorded among Slovene youth (49%), yet it still remained at almost one-half of the respondents (Flere 1988). In her analysis, Ana Dević notes that any ethno-national divisions became relevant in the public media only in 1987–1988 (Dević 2016, 33), and that more than any ethnic distancing, it was the sense of social powerlessness among the populations that marked the end of the 1980s in Yugoslavia (Dević 2016, 22). Even at the end of 1989, 66% of Croats and 72.1% of Serbs stated that the inter-ethno-national relations in their community were mainly or very good. High percentages of respondents (72% of Croats and 86.6% of Serbs) did not consider "mixed" marriages to be more unstable than others (Dugandžija 1991, 101–114, in Gagnon 2004, 36). The perception of bad relations considered only the relations between the republics—that is, between the political elites rather than among communities themselves (Gagnon 2004, 36).

In 1990, in a poll led by the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, 10.66% believed that Yugoslavia should further centralize, while the same percentage of poll respondents believed that Croatia should be independent; but the majority—51.66% of the population—believed that Yugoslavia should transform into a confederation (Grdešić et al. 1991, 199–200). At the beginning of 1990, the situation was not clear-cut even in Slovenia: 50.6% of respondents believed that Slovenia should be "a state within a Yugoslav confederation with the large autonomy of certain republics," while only 23.3% of the population wanted Slovenia to be "a completely independent state" (Jović 2017, 46). The full dissolution of the country simply was not a demand of the Yugoslav populations. As Dejan Jović reminds us, "the

introduction of the multi-party system did not necessarily equate with a desire to break away from Yugoslavia" (Jović 2011, 137).

Nonetheless, the political elites continued to stoke ethno-nationalist tensions. Two documents in particular aimed to fuel the fire ever further. First, the draft Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) was leaked to the press in 1986, discussing "the crisis of the Yugoslav economy and society" and "the position of Serbia and the Serbian people"; outlining a clear nationalist agenda for the Serbian state. In response, "Contributions to the Slovene National Program" was published in *Nova revija* in 1987, discussing the possibilities for the full sovereignty of Slovenia (Jović 2011, 94).

The multiparty elections took place in April and May 1990. In Slovenia, the democratic anticommunist and pro-independence platform DEMOS (the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia) won 55% of the vote. In Croatia, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a hard-right pro-independence party, won 41.5%. Among the Serbian minority, almost half voted for the reformed League of Communists, which had initially transformed into the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP), and only 13.5% for the nationalist Serbian Democratic Party (Gagnon 2004, 35). Woodward justly notes that "the first multiparty elections in Yugoslavia were scarcely a clear mandate for anything" (Woodward 1995, 125). The political situation still had the potential to unravel in numerous directions.

Yet, the historico-political conjuncture led to the dismantling of the socialist Yugoslav state. The project to dissolve Yugoslavia required violence, and thus the demobilization of the pro-Yugoslav discourses and populations. On June 25, 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence. Just two days later, the Ten-Day War, or the Slovenian War of Independence, broke out between the Yugoslav People's Army and the Slovenian Territorial Defense and the police forces. On July 18, the Yugoslav army retreated from Slovenia, creating a de facto recognition of independence (Čalić 2013, 383). In 1990, tensions were already rising in Croatia with the so-called Log Revolution (where the Serbian minority blocked roads with logs after Croatia's self-proclaimed independence referendum) and the foundation of the Republic of Srpska Krajina (RSK). Armed incidents started to take place in the spring of 1991. By December 1991, Germany had decided to recognize Slovenian and Croatian independence, with the decision taking effect on January 15, 1992, despite divergent international views on how to address the deepening political and military crisis in Yugoslavia (Čalić 2013, 385).

Soon enough, both Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina followed with demands for independence and in the spring of 1992, the war in Bosnia

and Herzegovina began. As the war in Bosnia was raging, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) entered Croatian territory and the Yugoslav People's Army retreated. The conflict remained in a somewhat frozen state until 1995, when a major Croatian army offensive "liberated" the UN-protected zone in Western Slavonia and the Republic of Srpska Krajina, resulting in the expulsion of up to 200,000 Serbs (Čalić 2013, 402). Full civilian control and the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into Croatia took place in 1998 (Kasunić 2019). In the meantime, a more violent and complex war endured in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which only ended in 1995 with the conclusion of the Dayton Agreement (the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina), signed on November 21, 1995, in Dayton, Ohio, and ceremonially signed again on December 14, 1995, in Paris.

The Dayton Agreement cemented the ethno-national division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, establishing two entities: the predominantly Serb Republika Srpska and the mainly Croat-Bosniak populated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In parallel, throughout the 1990s, ethnic tensions in Kosovo continued and the authoritarian government of Slobodan Milošević further oppressed the Kosovo Albanian community. In 1997, the armed conflict escalated, leading to the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (and Kosovo), presented as a humanitarian intervention. Kosovo came under NATO and UN administration, which secured its de facto independence while leaving its final legal status unresolved. Only in 2008 did the parliament of Kosovo proclaim independence, which remains unrecognized by Serbia to this day. Finally, after fifteen years of a common state with Serbia after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Montenegro declared independence in 2006. The once-socialist Yugoslavia had, by the late 2000s, turned into seven independent states, with multiparty democracies colored by neoliberal impoverishment, authoritarian state capture, and continuous ethno-nationalist propaganda. The price was over 130,000 lives lost (Čalić 2013, 406).

While the "political, military and criminal elites made huge gains from privatizing property and companies they confiscated from the state" (Baker 2015, 66), the peoples of Yugoslavia both suffered and resisted the wars.[10] The Yugoslav Wars were imposed top-down as a political strategy,

10 "Peoples" ("*narod*" in Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian) had a specific connotation in socialist Yugoslavia: it marked an avoidance of ethno-national identification, uniting the Yugoslav populations under the common socialist project and working-class solidarity. Simultaneously, it was also used to mark the six constitutive groups (Bosnians/Muslims, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs, Slovenians), as distinct from "nationalities" ("*narodnosti*"), which marked nonconstitutive ethno-national groups like, among others, Hungarians and Kosovo Albanians.

primarily by creating hard borders, marginalizing the moderates, and further instigating violence against civilians (Dragojević 2019), with (ethno-) nationalism being used in the institutional struggle for hegemony within Yugoslavia (Brunnbauer and Grandits 2013, 15). After the wars ended, the (post)Yugoslav states entered a protracted political and economic transition, accompanied by shifts between peace and conflict and by a profound identitarian transformation (Jović 2017, 72). Throughout this period, political elites continued to promote historical revisionism and to suppress positive recollections of socialist Yugoslavia.

The Remnants of Yugoslavism, the Rise of Yugonostalgia[11]

Within these seemingly endless transitions, war trauma played a prominent role in both individual and collective memory, and it was simultaneously weaponized in official discourses. Once nostalgia appeared across the (post)Yugoslav space, for some scholars it was understood primarily as a screen memory for war trauma, aiming to resolve the relationship between perceived victims and perpetrators (Volčič 2007); or as a means to fill the narrative silences between expected disagreements among different contemporary ethno-communities (Palmberger 2016). This book, however, traces how layers of positive and negative memories interact without necessarily concealing or revealing trauma. For Yugoslav (and perhaps global?) citizens, the twentieth century appears to have been the last temporal horizon in which a future still seemed possible. Drawing on a Halbwachsian social-constructivist concept of the past and the relevance of social frameworks for the creation of memory narratives, this book conceptualizes memories as an outcome of many continuous dialogues and negotiations: a glimpse into one moment's articulation of a narrative, one that was different yesterday and will be different tomorrow. Memories exist only within that one moment; they have been different in the past, and they will be different in the future.

Erasing the memory of Yugoslavia still represents "the key ideological tool" (Stojanović 2010, 232) used by political elites in the (post)Yugoslav space, understood as (post)Yugoslav revisionism. This revisionism appears in many guises: the destruction of socialist-era monuments and the removal

In the majority of cases within this book and in the quotations from the interviewees, "peoples" was used with primarily the first "socialist" connotation in mind.

11 This section is largely based on Popović 2025a and Popović 2025b.

of street names; the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions and legislative initiatives that nationalize antifascism or place the Partisan and Chetnik movements on the same plane. Even the name of Yugoslavia has been replaced by "neutral" signifiers: Southeast Europe; the Western Balkans; the Region; or by the introduction of new idioms like "the Yugosphere," as coined by journalist Tim Judah (2009).

Memory politics remain contradictory, discordant, and case-dependent. Taking an example from Slovenia, we see the decision of the City of Ljubljana to rename one of its streets "Josip Broz Tito" in 2011. The decision was then annulled by the Constitutional Court of Slovenia, which asserted that "Tito symbolizes a totalitarian regime" (Flere and Klanjšek 2017). That same year, *Delo*, the major newspaper in Slovenia, conducted a survey which found that 83 percent of respondents were against removing Tito from street names (Radović 2013, 135), declaring their respect for the continuity of Yugoslav heritage as an integral part of Slovenian history. Meanwhile, Tito's monument in Velenje—formerly Titovo Velenje—has stood untouched in the city center since 1977, as has Tito's Square in the coastal town of Koper. In December 2025, a Slovenian citizen cut the head off the Tito statue in Velenje; the head was quickly recovered by the police and carefully reattached a week later, with a severe punishment awaiting the perpetrator, marking the monument as state-protected historical heritage. In neighboring Croatia, Marshal Tito Square in Zagreb kept its name throughout the 1990s and even after 2006, when the parliament of the Republic of Croatia declared the Yugoslav regime in Croatia from 1945 to 1990 as totalitarian;[12] in 2017, however, it was renamed the Republic of Croatia Square. The bust of Tito, which remained in the Croatian presidential office during the entire process of dissolution and the wars, was removed in 2015 by the then-president of the Republic of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović ("Kolinda izbacila Titovu bistu s Pantovčaka" 2015). In the meantime, Belgrade was left without any odonyms referring to Josip Broz Tito since the 1990s, through a litany of street name changes, yet it is home to the only Museum of Yugoslavia in the whole (post)Yugoslav space.

Since the 2010s, interest in the history of the socialist period in Yugoslavia has increased. A new wave of research (Duda 2014), along with a number of exhibitions, cultural events, theater, literature, and movies, spread among new generations of (post)Yugoslavs. However, in the public space any interest in Yugoslavia—or any positive reflection of the Yugoslav experience—is

12 Deklaracija Hrvatskog sabora o osudi zločina počinjenih tijekom totalitarnog komunističkog poretka u Hrvatskoj 1945–1990, *Narodne novine* 76/2006.

immediately marked as Yugonostalgia. Yugonostalgia has therefore become *a catch-all phrase for any reference to Yugoslavia*.

This book identifies two phenomena hidden behind the multitude of meanings assigned to Yugonostalgia in previous scholarship: (post)Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia, sometimes enmeshed, but standing on their own. (Post)Yugoslavism is primarily embedded in generational positionality, appearing as a meta-national identity, through the shared memories of Yugoslav childhood. (Post)Yugoslavism provides an identitarian continuity in all three forms in which it appears: culturalist, anti-neoliberal, and hopeful (see chapter 5). Built upon (post)Yugoslavism, and yet dependent (more) upon political positionality, Yugonostalgia also appears as a practice in three different forms: as a discursive strategy; as an intimate container for cognitive dissonances; and as a variety of resistance strategies transforming political imaginaries (see chapter 6). If we accept that "accusations and embraces of nostalgia are never value neutral" (Boyer 2010, 21), we can see how the so-called memory wars are essentially battles between diverse ideological interpretations of the Yugoslav past. There was some discussion about whether nostalgia can be an analytical category at all (Becker 2023, 3; Breznik and Močnik 2022); however, I argue that ignoring nostalgia both as a practice and a tool of analysis would mean rejecting contemporary political and social realities.

Nostalgia emerged as a field of interest to scholars in the seventeenth century. Originally, it was considered to be a medical condition, with potentially fatal consequences; later, with the advent of Romanticism, it became one of the human conditions for humanities and social sciences to explore. Ever since, nostalgia has been continuously perceived as a phenomenon on the rise, appearing due to the uncertainties of (post)modernity and the impossibility of imagining livable futures (Huyssen 2003) or attempts to secure continuity (Huyssen 2011) within the fast-paced change of the contemporary world. With the final victory of capitalism, postsocialist area studies became imbued with the research on so-called postsocialist nostalgia. Alexei Yurchak, in his work *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2006), rightfully notes that the scholarship has largely fallen into the trap of simplistic dualism: proclaiming Soviet socialism as "bad" and "immoral," leaving any nostalgia as a portrait of the "Soviet citizens [as] having no agency" (Yurchak 2006, 4). Somehow, despite all evidence to the contrary, nostalgia became a phenomenon reserved exclusively for the postsocialist space. Even more intriguingly, authors found nostalgia in cases of generations who were only born after the fall of the communist regimes, for which Sergei Oushakine coined the notion of "second-hand nostalgia" (Oushakine 2019).

Maria Todorova has claimed, reformulating Marx, that a "specter is haunting the world of academia: the study of post-Communist nostalgia" (Todorova and Gille 2010, 1), noting the exceptional place nostalgia had obtained as a specialty of the populations in East, Central, and Southeast Europe; this turned into "nostalgification," a dominant paradigm that "governs much of the research concerned with social remembrance in contemporary Eastern Europe" (Lankauskas 2015, 36). As the phenomenon seemed to flourish, so did academic works across the postsocialist space on Bulgaria (Creed 2010); the Czech Republic (Pehe 2020); (East) Germany and *Ostalgie* (Barney 2009; Berdahl 2010; Chauliac 2018; Clarke and Wölfel 2011; Dale 2007; Offenstadt 2018); Hungary (Nadkarni 2020); Romania (Georgescu 2016; Popescu-Sandu 2010); Yugoslavia and Yugonostalgia (Kurtović 2011; Palmberger 2016; Petrović 2010a, 2012, 2016; Pogačar 2011; Popović 2017, 2021; Schwandner-Sievers 2010; Velikonja 2010, 2017); and the Soviet Union (Alexievitch 2013; Mazur 2015; Yurchak 2006). A distinctive feature throughout this body of work was the contention that the emerging postsocialist nostalgia can only be understood in the context of the social catastrophe that followed the collapse of socialist regimes (Ghodsee 2011). In contrast to these postsocialist nostalgias, many postsocialist countries saw budding counter-nostalgias, like "Ustaša-nostalgia" in Croatia (Đurašković 2016), as part of far-right political movements mourning the pre-socialist period. The multitude of postsocialist nostalgias further underscored their lack of particularism, aligning them with broader political interpretations of nostalgia in the Western world.

In his comprehensive book on the (new) history of nostalgia, mostly within the Western world (or, more specifically, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States), Tobias Becker (2023) elucidates how epidemics of nostalgia have been repeatedly proclaimed since the 1960s, and sporadically even earlier. The very phrase "the politics of nostalgia" seems to have originated in the 1950s in the United States as an indictment of conservativism (Becker 2023, 61), embodied first in Reagan's 1980 campaign slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" (and later in Trump's "Make America Great Again"), or Margaret Thatcher's "Victorian Values," which she later claimed to be "fundamental rules" (Becker 2023, 85). However, in the public space, it seems that the return of nostalgia in the Western world appeared only in the last decade. Analyses of Brexit identified nostalgia as one of the main causes (Barber 2018; Byers 2019; Heath et al. 2022; Saunders 2020), while the EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier claimed that "Brexit was caused partly by 'nostalgia for the past' that served no purpose in politics" (Rankin 2019). Similar analyses appeared in relation to the first-term election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (Arnade 2017; Bonikowski

and Stuhler 2022; Brownstein 2016). In 2018, Bertelsmann Stiftung conducted and published a study under the name *The Power of the Past: How Nostalgia Shapes European Public Opinion* (De Vries and Hoffman 2018), concluding that "nostalgia is a powerful political tool" which appears as an important element of far-right movements. Julian Göpffarth found that the nostalgia which appears among well-off local intellectuals within far-right groups exists in two forms: as positive nostalgia for a guilt-free past, and as negative nostalgia characterized by resistance to socialism (Göpffarth 2021).

Some strands of scholarship have framed nostalgia primarily as a product of capitalist gluttonous commercialization and commodification of the past, uncovering the political unconscious of alienation of the late capitalist present through the "nostalgia mode" and accompanying cultural artifacts and style (Jameson 1991); simply turning into yet another form of tourism in the era of mass tourism, namely "memory tourism" (Bartoletti 2010); or the phenomenon of "retro" as "simultaneous political rejection of the past and aesthetic indulgence combined with ironic appreciation" (Pehe 2020, 5). Seemingly a cultural phenomenon, it has become clear that there is an inseparable political layer in nostalgia.

In psychology, recent scholarship has confirmed nostalgia as a constructive resource (Routledge et al. 2008; Sedikides et al. 2006, 2015), fostering social connectedness (a sense of belonging or acceptance), meaning in life (a sense that one's life is significant, purposeful, and coherent), and self-continuity (a sense of connection between one's past and present self) (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022). Recently, memory scholars have underlined the dangers of overfocusing on traumatic and negative memories, instead encouraging an emphasis on the relevance of positive and hopeful reminiscences (Rigney 2018a; Sindbæk Andersen and Ortner 2019), with nostalgia being one example of these. Nevertheless, nostalgia remained largely perceived as a melancholic and disabling emotion for any decisive social action and change.

The very term "Yugonostalgia" was coined in 1992 in an anonymous article in the weekly *Globus* in Croatia,[13] when five anti-nationalist women writers and activists—"five witches"—were accused of being "Marxist feminists, communist and postcommunist profiteers, daughters of communists and Yugonostalgics" (Kolstø 2014, 766).[14] The origin of the term was silently

13 It was later discovered that the author was journalist Slaven Letica.

14 The title of the article was "Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia." The five accused activists were Jelena Lovrić, Rada Iveković, Slavenka Drakulić, Vesna Kesić, and Dubravka Ugrešić. Soon after, three of them left the country.

forgotten and continued to be gradually imbued with widened meanings, yet always remained negative. As Dubravka Ugrešić, one of the accused "witches," rightly put it, when memories are erased, nostalgia can become a dangerous and subversive category, independently of its triviality (2008).

Reminiscing about Yugoslavia became subversive, while Yugonostalgia developed into a refuge for postsocialist subjects' cognitive dissonances,[15] as this book will further show. While revisionist hegemonic discourses claim to be "protecting the truth" (Boym 2011, 453), (post)Yugoslav memory narratives emerged as forms of counter-memory, taking place in life narratives, in intimate environments, calling into question the newly established truth (Boym 2011, 453).

When the European Fund for the Balkans conducted research in 2011 (Kačarska 2012) comparing Yugonostalgia across two generations—those born in 1971 and those born in 1991—it found that most members of the younger cohort believed their parents' lives in Yugoslavia had been better than their own lives in the (post)Yugoslav states, with the exceptions of Croatia and Kosovo. Respondents from both generations cherished their good relationships with people from other (post)Yugoslav countries. A number of public opinion polls have looked into the Yugonostalgic narratives beyond the generational lens and across the (post)Yugoslav space. That same year, the polling agency Ipsos conducted research for the project *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in West Balkan States* (IPSOS 2011). When asked if they regret the breakup of Yugoslavia, citizens mostly responded positively: 70.9% in Serbia; 68.2% in Bosnia and Herzegovina; 63.1% in Montenegro; and 45.3% in Macedonia, while only 18% in Croatia and 5% in Kosovo did so. In 2016, a Gallup poll similarly asked whether the disintegration of Yugoslavia had been harmful or beneficial for respondents' countries, and the results echoed these patterns: majorities in Serbia (81%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (77%), Montenegro (65%), Macedonia (61%), and Slovenia (45%) judged it harmful, while even in Croatia (23%) and Kosovo (10%) some respondents concurred (Keating and Ritter 2017). These data make clear that Croatia and Kosovo exhibit markedly lower levels of Yugonostalgic sentiment than the rest of the (post)Yugoslav states. While Slovenia may still be considered among the more "Yugonostalgic" countries, Croatia and Kosovo cannot. Their divergent transitional trajectories, war experiences,

15 First conceptualized by Leon Festinger (1957), an American psychologist, cognitive dissonance refers to the mental discomfort that arises when a person holds conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. To restore a sense of internal consistency, we tend to employ various strategies that reduce this discomfort, often by altering one or more of those attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors.

historical legacies, and foundational ethno-national mythologies all shape the so-called Yugonostalgic realities in distinct ways.

However, the data show Yugonostalgia, and (post)Yugoslavism, remain empirical phenomena, across (post)Yugoslav borders, even if still insufficiently conceptualized or explained. Yugoslavism has been successfully erased from the public discourses, or subsumed under the label of Yugonostalgia. Public opinion polls often produce grandiose conclusions, regardless of the methodological (un)soundness and biases brought by the question formulation and sampling. Beyond methodological caveats, analytical precision is often lacking in mass media interpretations. For example, the high proportion of Serbian citizens who view Yugoslavia's dissolution as harmful does not necessarily indicate Yugonostalgia; it may instead reflect nationalist dissatisfaction that "Serbia lost Kosovo" or that "all the Serbs no longer live in one country." The case of Serbia further reflects the ambiguities in the mainstream discourses, as during the 1990s, Slobodan Milošević created a fictitious Yugoslavism, claiming that his destructive and nationalist policies were "in defense of Yugoslavia," even as the state—still formally named Yugoslavia until 2003—consisted only of Serbia and Montenegro.[16]

Across the (post)Yugoslav space, Yugoslav artifacts—pictures of Tito, Yugoslav maps and flags, small sculptures, or even just tourist postcards—were never thrown out of homes, sometimes not even during the conflicts. Even if they might have been put away in attics or garages during the 1990s, they slowly reemerged after the wars. Yugoslav music can be heard not only in the privacy of people's homes, but also in regular bars and *kafanas*.[17] The same movies are watched and appreciated throughout the (post)Yugoslav space. A recurring reference during European and world championships, especially in basketball and water polo, is the familiar refrain that "we would be invincible if Yugoslavia still existed." Even a left-wing magazine, *Jacobin*, on November 29, 2025, called for the reunification of the Yugoslav basketball team (Editors of Jacobin 2025).

Since the 2000s, the emotional space of Yugonostalgia has also become a commodity and a brand. Bars and cafés named after Tito or Yugoslavia have multiplied. "Ex-Yu music" parties are organized by student groups, youth organizations, and nightclubs; and T-shirts featuring Tito are sold alongside those depicting new ethno-nationalist leaders and war criminals. In 2010, it would have been difficult to imagine Croatian national

16 From 2003 to 2006, the country was called Serbia and Montenegro.

17 A *kafana* is a typical Balkan place for outings and meetings—a restaurant, a café, and a bar, all in one.

television broadcasting a series titled "Black and White World" (*Crno-bijeli svijet*)—named after a popular Yugoslav pop song—depicting life in 1980s Croatia, let alone that it would become one of the region's most popular shows. Private museums dedicated to everyday life in socialist Yugoslavia have also opened, such as the 80s Museum in Zagreb (*Zagreb 80-ih*) and the Red History Museum in Dubrovnik (*Muzej Crvene povijesti*). Even if these institutions commercialize nostalgic sentiments and retro-brand communist history for the Balkanist gaze of tourists, the nostalgic industry has undeniably saturated the market.

A number of people, though relatively few, continuously gather in Kumrovec (Tito's birthplace) or at Tito's Mausoleum in Belgrade for the most important Yugoslav-era anniversaries (May 25, Youth Day and Tito's birthday, and November 29, Republic Day). These are the pictures represented in media as key Yugonostalgic spaces. On November 29, 2025, as part of the AVNOJ Fest in Jajce—another key Yugonostalgic site, the historical place in Bosnia and Herzegovina where socialist Yugoslavia was founded in 1943—the Slovenian band Laibach, once well known for its members' harsh criticism of socialist Yugoslavia, played. Furthermore, at the very beginning of the concert, the band members even read aloud an apology to Tito for their participation in Yugoslavia's dissolution.

All these mediatic tropes appear often as primary associations of the socialist Yugoslav past. However, they are accompanied by ideological and political meanings. The associations among the last pioneers range from cultural and sporting ones (Bijelo dugme, Cibona, Lepa Brena, New Wave, Zdravko Čolić); through events (Sarajevo Winter Olympics of 1984); images and sentiments (the ethno-national costumes of all peoples; a large and beautiful country; a pleasant and optimistic life; carefree times; happy childhood; no borders; the Adriatic Sea; friendship; togetherness; power); to social and political values and institutions (solidarity; brotherhood and unity; peace and freedom; socialist revolution; modernity; the Non-Aligned Movement; self-management; the Yugoslav woman).

Despite the devastating wars, many locate healing effects and progressive hopes for the future more readily in the Yugoslav past than in imported frameworks of transitional justice. People who were once terrorized by ethno-nationalist violence and thrust overnight into profound identity ruptures became entangled in concepts of blame, guilt, and responsibility. As Lea David argues in *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (2020), the human rights memory agenda can deepen ethno-national divisions and exacerbate social inequalities.

Interestingly, among the last pioneers interviewed here, concepts of transitional justice were most readily embraced by those on the right and among centrist liberals, who strongly believe in the impossibility of shared life among diverse ethno-national communities. Instead of binary categories of perpetrators and victims, the introduction of concepts such as the "implicated subject" (Rothberg 2019), which offer more nuanced visions of responsibility, appears particularly welcome. Following this line of thought, Aleksa,[18] a left-wing activist in Serbia who was himself a refugee, further elaborates his opposition to the concept, adding an important class perspective: "All that conception of collective responsibility is highly problematic because it completely erases the responsibility that stems from class. I mean, how does a beggar, who spent the war begging on the Republic Square, have the same responsibility as, I don't know, Vulin,[19] because they are both Serbs?"

Stepping away from the view of Yugonostalgia as merely commodified retro-fashion or as a screen memory for processing the burdens of a violent past, recent scholarship has highlighted the agency of nostalgic subjects, who reclaim their subjectivity through nostalgia's affective force. Scholars started viewing nostalgia as socially embedded, "as products of the different subject positions of those who encode and decode these nostalgic practices" (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, 490).

Yugonostalgia has been studied among general populations across the (post)Yugoslav space (Velikonja 2010); among the working class (Bonfiglioli 2019; Kojanić 2015, 2017; Petrović 2010a, 2012), and among diverse generations (Palmberger 2008, 2016; Popović 2021; Vučković Juroš 2012; Volčič 2007). It has also been identified among ethnic minorities: for example, the Italian minority in Istria (Altin and Minca 2018), or the Roma diaspora from across the (post)Yugoslav space (Sigona 2015). Yugonostalgia appears also among the (post)Yugoslav diaspora across multiple generations (Cukovic 2015; Milivojević and Müller-Suleymanova 2022), who acquire nostalgic sentiment not only through their families but also through encounters with the vivid and extant (post)Yugoslav cultural space, or within labor

18 All names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees. More detailed ethnographic accounts would have endangered their anonymity, so the descriptions remain limited to preserve the privacy of the interviewees. More information on the sample can be found in the annex at the end of the book.

19 Aleksandar Vulin is a politician from Serbia, who most recently served as deputy prime minister (2024–2025). He supported Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s and was one of the key figures of the Yugoslav Left, a political party founded and led by Milošević's wife, Mirjana Marković.

migrant communities, such as Albanian labor migrants in North Macedonia (Markov 2012).

The central debate within academic circles concerns the subversive potential of Yugonostalgia. One stream of thought holds that Yugonostalgia is a phenomenon incapable of generating a political movement or program (Breznik and Močnik 2022; Dimitrijević 2017; Horvat and Štiks 2015). The second one argues for the subversive and emancipatory potentiality of Yugonostalgia (Buden 2012; Petrović 2012; Velikonja 2010, 2011, 2013). In line with Stef Jansen's findings from the early 2000s that Yugonostalgia does not demand a new common state nor does it always represent adherence to Yugoslavism (Jansen 2005, 222–225), I confirm that today Yugonostalgia can still appear in forms that serve solely the consumption of "the past in the form of glossy images," as Fredric Jameson would put it (Jameson 1991, 287). Yet it can also appear take far more complex forms. Whether understood as a "memory without pain" (Velikonja 2017, 8), or an imperative framework when discussing the memory discourses and practices of (post)Yugoslav citizens (Petrović 2017, 24), Yugonostalgia continues to thrive as a signifier of many different interpretations.

Boris Buden argues that nostalgia is stripped of its political potential and significance through the "repressive infantilization" of postcommunist citizens (Buden 2012, 41). Acknowledging the political element in Yugonostalgia would require accepting its potential as a "retro-utopia" (Buden 2012), one of the new ideas for political mobilizations. Distinguishing between passive and active-emancipative forms of nostalgia, Mitja Velikonja identifies the key characteristics of emancipative nostalgia as social criticism, defense of the past, openness to the world, and political action (Velikonja 2013, 359). Whether it is more specifically researched as Titostalgia (Velikonja 2010), visually observed in the film "Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time" by Želimir Žilnik (1994), or seen as part of contemporary activist practices leaning on the Partisan heritage, like antifascist choirs appearing throughout the (post)Yugoslav space (Hofman 2016), Yugonostalgia's object of longing cannot always be identified, as it relates to different social, cultural, and political aspects of different Yugoslav periods. The high attendance of popular music concerts by Yugoslav and (post)Yugoslav artists within the (post)Yugoslav space has been interpreted as a political choice and an antinationalist statement: in her analysis of this phenomenon, Ana Petrov frames Yugonostalgia as (the politics of) love, promoted both by the performers and the audience (Petrov 2016, 2017). Whether Lepa Brena, the most popular singer of the socialist period in Yugoslavia, who herself transformed from broadly neutral to explicitly pro-Yugoslav positioning

(Hofman 2012; Petrov 2017), or new choirs singing Partisan songs (Hofman 2016), the Yugonostalgic tropes and frames appear essential. The Yugoslav antifascist, transnational, and feminist legacy lives on among (post)Yugoslav female artists, including music legends exactly like Lepa Brena (Tumbas 2022).

Once ethno-nationalist paradigms entered the political field, the mythologies on the medieval origins, and Golden Age narratives celebrating the grandeur of pre-Yugoslav statehood became central to new nation-building projects. Yet these were never framed as *nostalgia*, but as a legitimate cause for ethno-national awakening, reminding us again of the charged political meaning assigned to the term. Dubravka Ugrešić explains what is hidden behind this attribution of meaning to the term "Yugonostalgia" (1998, 36):

> Precisely because of the elusive nature of nostalgia, the authorities in the new states of former Yugoslavia have coined the term *Yugonostalgia* and given it an unambiguous meaning. The word is used as political and moral disqualification: the Yugonostalgic is a suspicious person, a "public enemy," a "traitor," a person who regrets the collapse of Yugoslavia (and hence the collapse of communism, and communism is "Serbo-Bolshevism"!), a Yugonostalgic is the enemy of democracy. The term "Yugonostalgia" belongs to the new terminology of war.

As politics in the (post)Yugoslav space increasingly unfolded as a *continuation of war by other means*, Yugonostalgic memory narratives became "by definition subversive, anti-systemic and emancipatory" (Velikonja 2011, 92). Building on Aleida Assmann's (2011) insight that collective memories function as ideologies in ongoing struggle and dialogue, I argue that Yugonostalgia stands in direct contestation and conversation with hegemonic ethno-nationalist and anticommunist discourses. Moreover, the very term Yugonostalgia often absorbs the phenomenon of still-existing Yugoslavism, thereby contributing to the erasure of the continuity of Yugoslav identities.

However, not all Yugonostalgic practices shape one's political views; for instance, a right-wing last pioneer from Croatia admitted that he regularly attended concerts by Đorđe Balašević.[20] Such practices may have influenced his willingness to participate in this research, but they do not change his public political identity—indeed, they are something he prefers to conceal. This reveals a subtle interplay between what is shown and what is hidden, between *private and public*, between the intimate and the performed. Within

20 Đorđe Balašević was a popular Yugoslav singer from Novi Sad in Vojvodina, Serbia.

this book, I show these ambivalences within the memory narratives of political actors: their internal discursive strategies to bridge the cognitive dissonances and ambiguities of their life narratives with their political positionalities. Reaffirming the use of the term Yugonostalgia, concurring with demands for the "re-signification of contaminated language rather than its rejection" (Petrović 2017, 25), this book brings to the fore the two sides of the same coin: (post)Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia—(post)Yugoslavism as an existing identity, and Yugonostalgia as a set of practices of the continuity of that identity. Both appear across the political spectrum, and through multidirectional memory narratives, "encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present,… between different agents or catalysts" (Rothberg 2010, 9). These diverse mnemonic communities—across political and generational locations—thus enter "a dialogic space" that opens "new visions of solidarity and new possibilities of coexistence" (Rothberg 2014, 654), a space in which the ambivalences and inconsistencies of our narratives can be shaped into a coherent narrative whole.

About Generation(s) and the Last Pioneers

A generation goes beyond "a mere chronological contemporaneity" (Mannheim 1952, 297). It includes participation in the same historical and social circumstances; the re-narration of family narratives, encompassing post-memory; and searching for one's own life meaning and identity. The biographical weight of an experience depends on whether it was encountered in childhood, when impressions form a "natural" worldview, or later in life, when new experiences are interpreted through, or against, these early cognitive frameworks. In Mannheim's understanding, early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world. All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, as a verification and fulfillment or as its negation and antithesis, further "dialectically" articulated (Mannheim 2011). Recent research suggests that generational location plays a more decisive role than political affiliation in shaping understandings of the socialist past (Szostak and Mihelj 2017, 8), a conclusion this book partially supports. If we understand the generational aspect as crucial for social memory, we must understand individual and social memory as embodied and intergenerational. Generational positionality largely takes the driver's seat when one is remembering childhood and establishing one's (post)Yugoslav identity. As cultural memory stores "caches of information" (Assmann 2006, 220), mediating between remembering and forgetting,

Yugonostalgia holds the cognitive dissonances that arise between social and political memory.

Memory narratives—our life stories—allow us to differentiate ourselves within larger groups without negating our sense of belonging. The strength of family influence in political socialization varies (Cutler 1976; Jennings et al. 2009; Zerubavel 2011), and family narratives intersect with mainstream discourses and master cultural narratives (Fivush and Merrill 2016). Memory narratives change "with major social shifts that affect entire mnemonics" (Misztal 2010b, 87). Researching the memory narratives of political actors from the generation of the last pioneers provides rich material for understanding how early Yugoslav socialization and the war years influenced their political identities. I believe that focusing solely on official memory politics, commemorations, and legislative frameworks—while certainly illuminating the dynamics of memory wars—cannot fully capture the intricate embroidery of a society's memory. One intervention this book makes is grounded in the concept of multidirectional memory, which encompasses "simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side *and* the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past" (Rothberg 2009, 4). The complexity of collective memory demands attention to individual life narratives in order to understand how memory interacts with both generational and political positionality.

Focusing on the generation of the last pioneers, I delineate this cohort using two birth years. The end point is straightforward: the last generation to join the Pioneers' Association was born in 1982. The festive day of joining the pioneers—a key rite of passage for Yugoslav children—still resonates in their memory. The Pioneers' Alliance in Yugoslavia, founded in 1942, was an organization to which all children belonged during the first seven grades of primary school. On every November 29—Republic Day—during the first year of their schooling, the young pioneers swore the pioneers' oath, after which they received a blue cap with a red star and a red scarf. Although the message of the socialist republic and the pioneers' oath changed across different periods in the history of the Yugoslav state (Duda 2015), the core values that were promoted resonate strongly in Yugoslav memories among the last pioneers. For the starting point, I chose 1974: the year of the final Constitution of socialist Yugoslavia, which deepened decentralization and federalization and proclaimed Tito president for life. In historiography and political analyses, this constitution is often perceived as one of the many beginnings of the end of Yugoslavia. The era between 1974 and 1990 is the last period of Yugoslav history, and it was simultaneously the era in which the generation of the last pioneers was born and started growing up.

Each generation has had a distinct Yugoslav experience and cultivates its own form of Yugonostalgia. Zala Volcic (2011) examined Yugonostalgia among those born between the mid-1960s and the 1970s in Serbia. Monika Palmberger identified three generations of Yugoslavs in Mostar—the First, the Last, and the Post (Palmberger 2016). Tanja Vučković Juroš (2012, 142) analyzed two cohorts, born in 1981 and 1991, both of which expressed a positive view of the Yugoslav past, emphasizing its greater solidarity, equality, and sense of community.

Building on these insightful works, turning to the generation of the last pioneers required an understanding of its specificities. Neither old nor young, the last pioneers today are the generation constituting the majority of adults in the (post)Yugoslav populations. Different political socializations produce different political generations, each marked by distinct values and behaviors (Tilly 2002; Grasso 2014; Neundorf and Niemi 2014). This generation grew up with the promise of a life very different from the one it ultimately encountered. In the impossibility of a strictly individual memory (Halbwachs 1968, 2), the last pioneers lean upon their generational positionality in the (re)creation of their memory narratives: as Palmberger rightly notes, not only through the experience of an event constituting a generation, but also "the interpretative act of making sense of it" (Palmberger 2016, 9). For the last pioneers, socialist Yugoslavia is as much rooted in "post-memory" (Hirsch 2012), "through means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (Hirsch 2012, 5), as is the memory of the Second World War transmitted by their grandparents. It is also grounded in communicative memory, which can span three to four generations (Assmann 2008, 32), including memories of earlier Yugoslav periods conveyed by their parents. Finally, it is rooted in the ideological framework of memory politics of the present.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs established at a young age tend to persist (Grasso 2016, 34). As Grasso believes that the most "politically impressionable years" are mid-to-late adolescence (between fifteen and twenty-five years of age) (Grasso 2016, 40), the last pioneers were between eight and sixteen years old when the dissolution of the country began and between eighteen and twenty-six when the new millennium arrived. While the foundations for their value systems might have been laid in their childhoods, their most politically impressionable years were the years of chaos and overnight rupture.

Political orientation is influenced by various socialization agents including family, friends, teachers, and media (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 209). There is no political socialization without transmission of memory

narratives, re-narrated within these social frameworks, and always further reinforced by "the durability of social bonds and frames" (Assmann 2010, 111). Our political socialization, fueled by our mnemonic socialization, thus produces political generations.

The intricacy of Yugonostalgia and (post)Yugoslavism, and their multiple forms, as demonstrated throughout this book—makes them phenomena that appear across the entire political spectrum and at different points in space and time. Their forms shift according to generational and political positionality. In the case of Yugonostalgia, I argue that depending on which narrative aligns more closely with one's political positionality, dissonance may remain seemingly resolved within a "banal" Yugonostalgic space, or it may develop into a more articulated resistance strategy, becoming collective and political.

For the generation of the last pioneers, the phenomenon observed is not singular. I conclude that the current interpretations obscure the differences between empirically existing (post)Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia, and through the life narratives of the last pioneers, I offer a typology of both phenomena as they appear within this generation. (Post)Yugoslavism manifests as culturalist, anti-neoliberal, and hopeful. Yugonostalgia, by contrast, appears as a discursive strategy used by ethno-nationalist political elites to label all non-negative references to the socialist Yugoslav past; an intimate container for reconciling cognitive dissonances between individual memory narratives and mainstream discourses; and a set of resistance strategies encompassing diverse interpretations, statements, and public practices. To paraphrase Ann Rigney (2016), it transforms the memory of the Yugoslav cause into a memory with a (post)Yugoslav cause.

The Last Pioneers as Political Actors in the (Post)Yugoslav Space

The complexity of the (post)Yugoslav memory narratives reminds us that renegotiation between conflicting narratives essentially represents ideological power redistribution, an ideological negotiation among political actors. As mainstream discourses operate through what Foucault calls a "regime of truth," political change inevitably brings historical revisionism in its wake. As myth and invention go hand in hand with identity politics (Hobsbawm 1997, 7), history and memory continuously lead ideological struggles for establishing the truth, and within that truth, our own political identity.

Narratives uncover the "stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" (Andrews 2007, 9), including

who they are as political subjects. Contrary to claims that memory cleavages simply mirror political positionality (Confino 2011, 199), I argue in this book that while political positionality shapes the interpretation of (nostalgic) memory narratives, it does not necessarily alter them. The last pioneers successfully slalom between the narratives as they shift between their identities. Ambivalences and dissonances do not necessarily demand a resolution: they are accepted as a part of life or tucked away as Yugonostalgia.

The specific political potential of Yugonostalgia and younger generations has been researched among left-wing activists in Serbia (Chushak 2013). Nadiya Chushak (2013) demonstrated how themes of national unity, international cooperation, economic prosperity, and cultural achievements—once the ideological foundations of the socialist Yugoslav state—today appear in Yugonostalgic narratives as critical reflections on the negative present, calling it "a rich cultural repertoire for progressive re-engagement with current political questions" (Chushak 2013, iv).

Building on this research, this book examines the Yugonostalgia of political actors across the political spectrum,[21] finding similar patterns throughout. Because the term "political actor" encompasses both non-institutional activists and institutional actors—and functions as a core analytical category in political sociology—it is used consistently here. It includes political party members (two-thirds of the interviewees) as well as what Inglehart (1990) terms "citizen activists": individuals engaged in various social movements (Della Porta 2014b, 19), including those organized as NGOs or trade unions. Notably, within a few years of the fieldwork, many of these movements formally institutionalized as political parties, further validating their inclusion.

These conceptualizations, by Inglehart and Della Porta, guided the identification of potential interviewees among the generation of the last pioneers. The sample—equally divided across the three countries—also reflected the broader patterns of political engagement in each context. With generation and political activism held constant as selection criteria, gender and class mirrored the realities on the ground: two-thirds of the interviewees were men, and nearly 90% had completed higher education. Half of them lived in the capital cities, and displayed clear traces in their family backgrounds of the upward social mobility enabled by the Yugoslav socialist system.

Because the fieldwork relied on snowball sampling and on participants' willingness to take part, almost 60% of the interviewees self-identify as

21 For more information on the sample, see the Annex.

left-wing and only 15% as right-wing. Among the majority of self-identified left-wing actors, I sometimes make note of those belonging to the so-called "established" postsocialist left, usually members of the "old" socialist left who rebranded their parties as social democratic parties, embracing neoliberal reforms, and those belonging to the so-called "new" left, progressive movements often labeled as radical left, per Igor Štiks's categorization (Štiks 2015, 2–3). All of these elements must be kept in mind in order to situate the results presented herein.

Any attempt to fully account for political activism in the selected (post) Yugoslav countries would require a book of its own. Because my working definition was intentionally broad, the diversity of political actors included in this research reflects the diversity of understandings of what political activism entails. In a café in the central square of Kragujevac, while Yugoslav pop star Tajči was playing in the background, a local political party activist of long standing, Bogdan, explained: "For me, political activism is when I repair the elevator in the building."

The activist scene in the (post)Yugoslav space, as elsewhere, is volatile. People enter politics, leave it, and return to it; organizations and movements emerge, dissolve, reform, and sometimes transform into political parties. For the majority of the last pioneers interviewed, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s triggered their political activism. Tijana from Belgrade explained it thus: "You can call it politics or rebellion, but always the need to scream collectively."

In Serbia, activism was most often described as standing up to the ethnonationalist authoritarianism of Slobodan Milošević—or, among those on the right, as following in one's father's footsteps. While the left remained marginal, right-wing actors flourished only after the 2000s. Many children of Marxists or left-leaning fathers became centrist liberals in the 1990s, only later rediscovering left-wing ideologies. For many, entering politics was one of two choices: either leave the country, or stay and try to change it. Once they chose to remain, becoming a political actor felt almost inevitable.

In Croatia, left-wing actors reflected on the discontinuities of leftist thought: their early political socialization drew primarily on Western leftist authors, and it took time to (re)discover Yugoslav socialist traditions. For many women, feminism provided the first opening toward rejecting capitalism and embracing left-wing activism.

In Slovenia, where the 1990s unfolded differently, other issues motivated the last pioneers: confronting the administrative politics of the "erasure" and the discrimination faced by (post)Yugoslav peoples, including workers from the "South"; or responding to the economic downturn of the 2000s and

the ethno-nationalist authoritarian governance of Janez Janša. For better or worse, once the majority of them entered politics, they never left, in the multitude of ways that activism can be understood. Or, as our last pioneer Una contended: "Poetry is also a tool of struggle, if you use it correctly."

While political actors represent only a fragment of the generation of the last pioneers, they are the ones now entering and increasingly shaping institutional politics: people in their forties and fifties, at the height of their political and socio-economic activity, and at the forefront of the generational shift. The paradox between hegemonic discourses—still strongly anti-Yugoslav and anti-Yugonostalgic—and public opinion polls showing that both Yugonostalgia and (post)Yugoslavism continue to hold a significant place in the imaginaries of the general population is mirrored in the paradoxes and cognitive dissonances within political actors' memory narratives. My intuition that this dissonance would be most visible, and most intelligible, among political actors led me to focus on this specific group within the generation of the last pioneers.

Situating Myself

In a book such as this—and indeed in any academic book—one must inevitably situate oneself. I am one of the last pioneers, I was born in Belgrade in 1982, and I do not identify myself ethno-nationally; if it is insisted upon, I identify as a Yugoslav. The overnight rupture of my happy socialist Yugoslav childhood spilled over into almost every area of my life and in a way, my entire professional and academic history was a way to work through what has happened to me, to my closest environment, and to my generation. This book is yet another attempt. Thus, it would have been impossible, as well as irresponsible, to conduct this research without continuous positional reflexivity (Macbeth 2001) in order to ensure the validity of my findings, to avoid bias—as much as it is possible for a flawed human being—and to understand my own relationship with the topic of my research. My "academic act of constructing knowledge" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 40) required constant examination. As knowledge was co-constructed in the interviews with my research participants, and further strengthened through my presence in the field, I remained consistently aware of three different perspectives: that of the researcher, the participant, and the research encounter itself (Enosh and Ben-Ari 2016).

In trying to remain attentive to the motivations of my research participants, one element stood out across all three countries: the last pioneers

were all genuinely delighted to take part. Some interviewees may have agreed only as a favor to a colleague or friend; others may have seen an opportunity for political visibility. Yet almost all appeared eager to tell *their Yugoslav story*. This book therefore presents a story—multifaceted and sometimes contradictory—that the actors themselves wished to tell. Yet what remains unsaid—the silences, the omissions, the stories withheld—forms an equally important part of the puzzle, though they remain hidden from view.

A second, unexpected element was the degree of trust extended to me. This research was conducted at a time when GDPR and overly extensive research administration protocols were not yet fully in place in France and Slovenia, where I was based at the time. Clumsily enough, I had no formal consent forms for participants to sign. I had only my word that the recordings of our interviews would be anonymized and be used exclusively for research purposes. This was something that worried me before my fieldwork, given the level of exposure of many of my interviewees, who were all well-known political and public figures. To my surprise, my word was enough. I remain deeply grateful for this trust, and humbled by it. My strong belief is that it was yet another element of generational solidarity, an experience that might have been different if my positionality was different. While I remained attentive to this dynamic during data analysis, in the process of data collection my positionality proved to be a significant advantage.

Being an emigrant doctoral student—part of the broader brain drain that has marked entire generations, including our own—certainly generated a degree of sympathy. My gender, as much as my age, also removed any possible suspicion regarding participation in the wars of the 1990s. A shared generational location further encouraged a sense of solidarity, helping the interviews unfold as a collective act of remembering. Being a (post)Yugoslav, belonging to the generation of the last pioneers, speaking the same language, and sharing (some of) the same memories often facilitated the interviews, whether in opening the conversation or encouraging the interviewees to speak more freely. Because I understood in-depth interviewing as a shared creation of knowledge, I occasionally offered my own memories when this was necessary to keep the conversation flowing. I did my best to ensure that none of my interventions "led the answers"—though this is something we can never know with certainty.

Despite—or perhaps because of—my extremely typical name and surname, which are widely perceived and consistently marked as "Serbian," this factor never surfaced in the conversations with the interviewees who participated in the research. It may, of course, have mattered to those who

never replied to my emails or declined the interview, but this remains in the realm of assumptions.

Being an "in-betweener" (McGhee et al. 2007), maintaining my identity as a researcher felt like the most important component of my field presence, even if it was not always a straightforward task to fulfill. The topic of my research also led to me *always being in the field*. Everywhere I traveled in the (post)Yugoslav space, as soon as I explained the reason for my stay and what the topic of my research was, people wanted to talk and start sharing their memories and thoughts. Given the "prolonged observation" (Cefaï 2010, 7) I have conducted, my position in the field also changed over time, as my positionality shifted through the continuum: I began to be "known" as the researcher working on this topic.[22]

I am immensely thankful for the life stories my research participants shared. The book before you, along with any misreadings or misinterpretations it may contain, remains solely my responsibility.

Methodology and Sources

Embedded in cultural memory studies and political sociology, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach to postsocialist nostalgia and its translation into the political field. Leaning on conclusions that official memory politics does not necessarily leave an imprint on people (Gensburger and Lefranc 2017; Vučković Juroš 2012), the book does not focus on the legislative frameworks, official memory politics, or mainstream discourses, as much as they provide necessary context. The focus is rather on how our own individual memory narratives are created in this continuous dance between the public and the private.

A Yugoslav approach to research on (post)Yugoslav memory narratives is an important element of this research. (Post)Yugoslav societies have been widely approached using the lenses of ethno-national identity politics, through the implementation of methodological nationalisms (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). Methodological nationalism and ethno-nationalism, seen as "gatekeeping concepts" (Appadurai 1986), have been the frameworks predominantly utilized in scholarship over the past decades (Archer et al. 2016, 3). As the fieldwork focused on three (post)Yugoslav countries—Croatia,

22 A small anecdote illustrates this: during my frequent commutes on the Ljubljana–Zagreb train, one of the border police officers began to recognize me and would regularly ask me how my PhD was progressing. I remain grateful for his unexpected encouragement.

Serbia, and Slovenia—this choice did not translate into ethno-national categories of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes: our interviewees were born in different parts of Yugoslavia, their parents were born in different parts of Yugoslavia, and they have family and friends across the (post)Yugoslav space. This is not a book on Croat, Serbian, and Slovene political actors, even if some of them do identify as such. This is a book on (post)Yugoslav political actors who happen to be living, at the time of the research, in the countries which today are Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. A single glance at the family structures, the entanglement of Yugoslav families across the (post) Yugoslav space, the migrations that took place, the inconsistencies between nationality and ethno-national self-identification (or imposition), all prove the wrongness of any approach which would be strictly comparative along the border lines of the new (post)Yugoslav states. To understand the (post) Yugoslav space, one must step beyond the newly imposed borders—and beyond the newly imposed ethno-nationalities.

Ideally, all seven states that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia would have been included in this research. Focusing on only three is therefore a limitation, but the precarious material and structural conditions of doctoral studies required a narrowing of scope.[23] Practical and historical considerations guided the choice. These three states played leading roles in the formation of the first Yugoslav state—the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—and their political leadership were central to the dissolution of its second incarnation (see Introduction). It is difficult to imagine socialist Yugoslavia disintegrating without their active involvement. Slovenia was the first to declare secession, followed by Croatia, and the wars that ensued unfolded under the false representation of Serbia's attempt to "save" Yugoslavia. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina would likely not have occurred without the involvement of Serbia and Croatia. In the imaginaries of Yugoslav peoples—regardless of how critically one may view this stance—a Yugoslav state without these three republics is almost unimaginable.

Once they became independent, each of these countries experienced different degrees of war and violence on their territories, different levels of engagement in subsequent conflicts across the whole (post)Yugoslav space, different transitional trajectories, and different geopolitical memberships and alliances. These realities added to the decision that they would be

23 Certainly, there have been plenty of works published on Yugonostalgia and Yugoslavism in the other (post)Yugoslav states. See Vangeli 2010; Moll 2013; Velikonja 2013; Krasniqi et al. 2016; Palmberger 2016; Jakimovska, Ashtalkovska Gajtanovska et al. 2017; Jovanovic 2018; Takševa 2019; Aydoğan 2022; Krasniqi 2025.

fruitful environments for capturing the complexities and diversities of the (post)Yugoslav space.

Critical grounded theory and political ethnography shaped the methodological framework of this research, complemented by critical discourse analysis and participant observation. While the study engaged with the discourses of political parties and various organizations—including their programs, press statements, websites, and publications—the core data was generated through in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews. I spent two intensive years in the field, 2017 and 2018, during which I conducted sixty-seven interviews[24] with political actors identified through snowball and purposive sampling. In Slovenia, I conducted twenty-one interviews; in Croatia and Serbia, twenty-three each. In Croatia, all interviewees fully met the criteria. In Slovenia, three interviews were excluded from analysis due to age or the nature of their political activism, and in Serbia two were similarly omitted.[25] I worked with two main groups: (then) members of parliament and other political actors; and members of political parties who were not MPs, as well as participants in social movements and political initiatives.

In-depth qualitative interviews and a prolonged presence in the field have allowed me to enter the intimate and political worlds of the generation of the last pioneers. Furthermore, this project has also provided an opportunity to hear the political actors' narratives outside of their usual public discourses, thereby gaining access to their personal reflections and the interplays between their memories and their political positionality. There was an overall interview framework prepared, and the questions were adapted to each interview situation and each interviewee. Usually, the conversation would start with reflections on their political activism

24 This resulted in approximately 111 hours of interviews and 2,000 pages of transcripts.

25 In Slovenia, there were two cases of far-right interviewees who were not politically active at all: they did not belong to a political party, NGO, or social movement, nor were they engaged in any of the activities outlined above, aside from a personal interest in politics. As such, they did not meet the sample requirement of political activism. One interviewee in Slovenia also questioned the length of her own political engagement, but I chose not to exclude her; anyone active in the political field for at least six months was considered eligible for the interview. In both Slovenia and Serbia, three interviewees had to be excluded because they did not belong to the generation of the last pioneers. Particularly interesting was one interviewee in Serbia born in 1986 who falsely claimed to have been born in 1982. This person maintained the deception throughout a two-hour interview, describing events they could not have experienced. Through social networks and mutual acquaintances, I later discovered their actual year of birth. I did not pursue the motivation behind this act, though I would be curious to know. In one case in Slovenia, the interviewee offered valuable insights but had so little time available that the interview could not be completed, and sadly enough, no alternative slot could be arranged. Given the quality of the exchange, I decided to include this shorter interview in my analysis.

before slowly steering toward the interrelations between their personal and political narratives, starting from the event of becoming a pioneer and flowing into a life narrative telling us their story of growing up at the end of the socialist Yugoslav period, through the wars and the transitions, into the political actor they are today and their current views on Yugoslav history, (post)Yugoslavism, and Yugonostalgia. As previously noted, all interviews were marked with an astounding level of trust, openness to reflection, and an incredibly gratifying experience of co-creating knowledge.

My prolonged presence in the field facilitated the choice of relevant movements and organizations, which was largely confirmed by subsequent developments: many of these movements turned into political parties and started participating in formal political life. Another important element was to gather interviewees from the entire political spectrum, from far right to far left. The most difficult political party to access was HDZ (the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union), along with other right-wing political actors in Croatia. Setting up interview dates and times proved to be easier with members of parliament than noninstitutional political actors,[26] but the overall access to interviewees was as smooth as any researcher could hope.

Introducing the empirical data from interviews with politically active representatives of the generation of the last pioneers, a generation that has not been researched previously, provides new insights and new information into the field of research on Yugonostalgia, (post)Yugoslavism, and (post) Yugoslav memory. Looking into the commonalities of this (post)Yugoslav generation of the last pioneers, the book also outlines the convergences between political actors in Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia, emphasizing their proximities rather than their distances while avoiding methodological nationalism, and adds to the understanding of (post)Yugoslav political subjectivities and their (re)construction of the (post)Yugoslav space.

Structure of the Book

This book does not look into commercialized material memorabilia; *lieux des mémoires*; commemorations; public discursive battles over street

26 One noteworthy aspect of the fieldwork was the ease with which I could access the parliaments. Scheduling an appointment with an MP was sufficient; security procedures were routine, and no special clearance was required. I am grateful for these conditions, which I attribute to the relatively small size of the countries studied and their generally stable security environments, reflected in low or negligible security threat levels.

names and public monuments; Yugonostalgic parties and popular culture; artistic projects; music, television, and cinema production; or literature and literary festivals. It also does not approach Yugonostalgia from the point of view of an existing Yugosphere (Judah 2009), nor look specifically into Titostalgia (Velikonja 2010). While understanding memory as both an individual act and a form of social interaction (Kuljić 2011, 51), and considering Yugonostalgia a legitimate object of political study, this book brings us closer to an understanding of the multilayered, multidirectional foundations of Yugonostalgia and (post)Yugoslavism, and the full range of their contents. Being a piece of qualitative research, this book also does not intend to "measure" Yugonostalgia among the last pioneers. As Clifford Geertz (1998) explained, ideology compensates for the emotional chasm between the present situation and the desired situation. I believe that identity and nostalgia find themselves in this ideological role, resolving cognitive dissonances and translating the memory of historical progress into a possibility for future progress. Once our capacity for imagining future utopias ceases, or, as Fredric Jameson noted: "our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself,... not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systematic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (Jameson 2005, 289), we seek examples from the past.

The structure of the book follows the flow of the described life narratives, following both the flow of the interviews themselves as well as the lives of the last pioneers. Starting with the memory narratives from their earliest childhoods, in the first chapter I depict the initial political socialization of the last pioneers, primarily within their families. As self-described "children of socialism," our[27] last pioneers entrench themselves in their generational positionality, depicting the role of the socialist Yugoslav heritage in their identity formation. Remembering the carefree spirit across all three states and across the entire political spectrum, within their narratives the last pioneers develop the concept of a Yugoslav family, depicted as a special phenomenon which withered away alongside the dissolution of the country. In their understanding, a Yugoslav family is marked above all by diversity: in religious, ethno-national, class, and political terms.

27 Within this book, I used the definite article "the" and the possessive adjective "our" interchangeably without aiming to generalize the presented results to the whole generation of the last pioneers, but always keeping in mind that these results relate solely to the interviewed sample.

The second chapter delves into the early political socialization beyond families, discovering how the last pioneers developed their natural view of the world (Mannheim 1952). Looking into Yugoslav schools, we uncover the memory narratives surrounding the book's title: the pioneers and the role of the Pioneers' Alliance, but more than that, the ritual of becoming a pioneer. The diversity of Yugoslav schools—reflecting the diversity of Yugoslav families—emerges as another crucial element of the last pioneers' political socialization, with its depth shared by the temporal distinction between "older" and "younger" last pioneers. From these memories, the concept of a normal life appears, strongly embedded in their political positionality, suggesting solidarity as the key value of their Yugoslav political socialization. The first cracks in their memory narratives begin to surface, as the last pioneers question their own capacity to remember and the truthfulness of their recollections, introducing a reflexivity that continues throughout their life stories.

The third chapter unravels the political socialization of the last pioneers during their adolescence, which took place during the dissolution of the country, accompanied by wars and impoverishment. The memory narratives of peaceful childhoods are disrupted by the 1990s, as these recollections begin to be (re)shaped more by political positionality than by generational experience. As the country falls apart around them, the last pioneers become refugees, and their closest environments dissolve in various ways. The shock of "unbecoming" Yugoslavs also propels them toward diverse political positionalities, even as they continue to absorb the impact of the wars.

Building on this development, the chapter four examines the emergence of cognitive dissonances and the ways in which generational positionality starts to be replaced by political positionality, calling for diverse strategies to reconcile the hegemonic discourses, often leading to both individual and collective revisionisms. Despite their differing political positionalities and high levels of reflexivity, the last pioneers resist making definitive claims about the wars or asserting absolute truths, even regarding the identification of perpetrators. The chapter delineates divergences across (post)Yugoslav environments and states, while recognizing the inherent messiness of these narratives' revisionisms as they unfold beyond the public sphere.

In the fifth chapter, I conceptualize contemporary (post)Yugoslavism through the idea of "no state, no nation—common space, common identity." The chapter starts by elucidating the concept of home as it appears in our last pioneers' narratives, rooted in the ideas of socialist Yugoslavism. Further on, the chapter elaborates three forms in which

(post)Yugoslavism appears among our last pioneers: one culturalist, one anti-neoliberal, and one hopeful. These three forms of (post)Yugoslavism gather our last pioneers from all sides of the political spectrum, making a clear distinction between (post)Yugoslav identity and Yugonostalgic practices. We see how (post)Yugoslavism appears as an anti-nationalist and meta-national identity, created as a counter-identity and a response to ethno-nationalisms.

The sixth and final chapter lays out my understanding of Yugonostalgia as a practice in its three most common forms today, both among the last pioneers and beyond: as a disqualifying discursive strategy of the hegemonic anti-Yugoslav discourses; as an intimate container for cognitive dissonances, appearing as a result of contradicting hegemonic discourses and individual memories; and as a set of diverse resistance strategies leaning on the political positionality of left-wing last pioneers who draw inspiration from Yugoslav history and socialist Yugoslav ideology.

The Epilogue reflects on where the last pioneers stand today, several years after the research was conducted: how the context has shifted, the extent to which they have occupied the political field, and whether they have carried elements of their (post)Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia into the contemporary (post)Yugoslav political space—or whether their focus has moved elsewhere. The Annex provides a detailed outline of the sociological structure of the sample.

Life stories are indispensable for our access to life experiences. As fickle as they might be, they represent the entrance to history as it was experienced, as well as the meaning given to it in the present. They become social and political constructions of the past and of our own identities. Or, as Mark Freeman noted, "the *history* one tells, via *memory*, assumes the form of a *narrative* of the past that charts the trajectory of how one's self came to be" (Freeman 1993, 33).

This book captures this phenomenon by deconstructing the allegedly political dimensions of Yugonostalgia, uncovering forgotten Yugoslavisms, and unpacking the processes through which individuals reconcile their life narratives with generational and political positionality. I argue that the (post)Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia of the last pioneers' generation disrupt the (post)Yugoslav memory regimes (Dujisin 2024)—hegemonic memory discourses shaped through selective remembrance that "mirrors prevailing power relations" (Dujisin 2024, 144). These practices appear simultaneously as private and political acts, offering alternative selections of memory narratives that may enter the realm of collective memory.

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1. Yugoslav Childhoods: The Early Political Socialization of the Last Pioneers

Abstract: This chapter examines childhood as a foundational site of political socialization for the last pioneers, focusing on family life, schooling, religion, class mobility, and interethnic relations in socialist Yugoslavia. It reconstructs Yugoslav childhood as a shared experiential framework marked by ideals of brotherhood and unity, social security, and upward mobility. Through their life narratives, the last pioneers conceptualize a Yugoslav family as, above all, marked by diversity in religious, ethno-national, class, and political terms, becoming the basis of their fundamental values. By foregrounding everyday practices rather than state ideology alone, the chapter demonstrates how Yugoslavism was lived, embodied, and internalized.

Keywords: childhood; political socialization; generation; Yugoslav family; class mobility; interethnic relations

What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There's nothing more powerful in the world than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it.
—Tyrion Lannister, *Game of Thrones* (2019)

For the generation of the last pioneers, it is a simple fact of life that they were born in Yugoslavia, grew up in Yugoslavia, and were educated in Yugoslavia, all of them. Their shared socialist Yugoslav childhood is one of the key elements that constitutes them as a generation, building common generational references, remaining forever as stories that unite them. Our

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pasts are available to us as long as they are narrated, constructed through "memory, desire, fantasy, and myth" (Hall 2017, 130), and it is through telling our (childhood) stories that we create our identities; anchoring ourselves in a narrative that proves a continuity of who we are today with who we once were. As much as these stories differentiate us from others, they also draw us into communities. Understanding the past as "a story with a function, as a motor of progress or a basis of continuity" (Assmann 2008, 89), this book begins its quest for the deconstruction of nostalgia, right here: in the first fleeting, blurry, scattered memories of childhood.

Understanding both generational and political positionality, the political activism and political socialization of the last pioneers starts in their childhoods. Investigating childhoods in relation to political activism "enables a reframing of political socialization as a lifelong process with inter-generational connections" and "by engaging with the pasts, presents and imagined futures of activism, we discover that political activism can be found in mundane activities as well as in banal spaces" (Nolas et al. 2017a, 6, 9). Throughout our interviews, the last pioneers repeatedly referred to themselves as the "children of socialism."[1] But what does this really mean for them? What did it mean to be a (last) Yugoslav pioneer, and what does it mean today to be a child of socialism? How do they remember growing up in Yugoslavia? And how do they see their Yugoslav childhoods playing a role in their contemporary understanding of the world and their political identities?

One thing is certain for the interviewed last pioneers across Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia: their childhoods were marked by a carefree spirit, in stark contrast with what followed and to their lives today. Remembering how they grew up, their family environments, all the stories heard from their parents and grandparents, along with scarce flashes of their own early memories—collectively evoke a sense of *the good old times*. Before Yugoslavia fell apart, the very second before the war became an everyday reality and an everlasting trauma, how did our last pioneers live, and where did they come from?

1 Two interesting references can be made to the term "children of socialism." The first is a short-lived punk band from Slovenia, which existed between 1981 and 1986, under the name *Otroci socializma* (Children of Socialism) The band released a self-titled album in 1982, with songs critical of the Yugoslav regime. In 1987, as part of the awakening revisionist anti-Yugoslav discourses, a journalist from Serbia, Milomir Marić, published a book under the title *The Children of Communism*. The book aimed to dismantle the official regime's historical narratives and was considered dissident at the time of its publication. While lacking in serious and rigorous scientific basis, the book became a bestseller. Thus, the idiom "children of socialism" could be perceived with a number of diverse connotations, and yet among our last pioneers it carries a very different meaning.

Some studies claim that adolescence is the moment when individuals begin to seek an understanding of their identities—often through sharing, adopting, and reinterpreting family narratives (Merrill and Fivush 2016)—and that political sentiments emerge particularly at this stage (Braungart and Braungart 1986). However, widely conducted research on the children's political socialization shows that even those as young as three to six can display a degree of awareness of the world around them and emotional attachment to certain symbols, without fully comprehending their meaning. If we understand political socialization as a process of learning and forming political attitudes and behavior corresponding to our societal position, mediated through various channels (Hyman 1959; Ryder 1965), then early childhood experiences clearly stand at the core of early political socialization, shaped primarily within the families. Through this early socialization, generations are formed: the "coming into existence" of specific age groups in a society always takes place within "a certain historical and political setting" (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 206).

To be born in the 1970s and 1980s in Yugoslavia meant to be born into a Yugoslav family, a trope that recurs in the life stories of the last pioneers. I became curious to understand what this idea of a *true* Yugoslav family meant for them. The most common association is the so-called mixed marriage, a term reserved for families in which parents came from different ethno-national backgrounds. Yet, for the last pioneers, a Yugoslav family—their first site of political socialization—signifies a broader heterogeneity, extending well beyond ethno-nationality.

The mere adjective *Yugoslav* shows up in a multitude of meanings, broader than ethno-national diversity. Yugoslav families were created from different class and social backgrounds, different political viewpoints, different origins, different religions, and, yes, different ethno-national backgrounds. The diversity of Yugoslav families was a mirror reflection of the diversity of the broader Yugoslav society.

Zorana, a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina now living in Serbia, sits in her small, vibrant apartment, sipping strong black coffee. With a personality as bright as her home, she is active in various social movements across the (post)Yugoslav space. She notes: "I wouldn't even have the opportunity to have such a family if it wasn't for Yugoslavia; they were never strained by nationalisms. I really lived in a family who … we had our Christmas tree up until January 14,[2] for example.… I didn't know until 1991

2 Serbian Orthodoxy continues to use the Julian calendar, which results in Christmas Eve being on January 6, Christmas Day on January 7, and thus New Year's Eve on January 13.

why it was important for us to have a Christmas tree until January 14. But it was there." In these narratives, Yugoslav childhood appears as a space where diversity existed without children fully understanding the reasons behind—different traditions, different dialects, different churches, and different world outlooks—nor the origins of these differences. These rich multitudes were yet to be discovered. War made the understanding of identity and family narratives urgent, but in their childhoods the world seemed very different.

Religious Upbringing and Political Pluralism in a Socialist Country

Before the war erupted, political diversity was also remembered as a feature of Yugoslav families, challenging the persistent myth of monolithic communist societies. As the last pioneers revisited their childhood memories, underlining the political heterogeneity of their family homes, only one noted that such diversity still exists in their own family today. Whether this heterogeneity reflects political socialization that extended beyond the one-party system, or whether socialist Yugoslav society itself allowed for more openness than is often assumed, the last pioneers expressed pride in the environments in which they grew up.

Zvjezdana, a university professor from Slavonija and a self-declared Christian Democrat, arrived at the interview with her newborn baby. Amid the bustle of a humid summer day, Zvjezdana recalled how her communist father and anti-communist religious mother reconciled their disagreements through humor: "We often joked that Jesus was the first communist." Once a fervent Catholic herself, her views on institutional religion have shifted over time, yet she cherishes the environment in which she grew up. Marko, a last pioneer from Slovenia, equally proudly highlighted the richness of diversity in his family home in a small town near the Italian border: "We have a lot of books at home. We have the Quran and the Bible and Tito's biography and Marx and Engels." Adding to these reflections, Vuk sits in a busy café near the Croatian Parliament in Zagreb's Gornji grad. An independent member of parliament, and proud of it, he comes from a family with a Marxist mother and a Christian father in Croatia. He explains:

> Yes, yes, I believe that the context possibly brought me to liberal ideas, because I was not molded in the family context in only one narrative. Mother remained a Marxist, a leftist; she was a history teacher later

> on. Father continued to nurture that religious dimension, Christian democracy. The two of them necessarily had to cooperate, as a family. We, as children, then absorbed that religious metanarrative of my father, and the other metanarrative of my mother. So, we have seen what each one brings. Father accepted the pioneer oath as a fact; he did not dispute it. Mother was satisfied; it was part of her cult.

At a young age and within the routines of our everyday family life, we learn the practice of talking politics, which is seen as a "collaborative activity between generations" (Nolas et al. 2017b, 70). Through these intergenerational interactions, children's political socialization becomes "an embodied, sensory experience mediated by particular *récits* that are both familiar and strange, in which biography and history become sedimented at the same time as the telling of stories disrupts taken for granted meanings" (Nolas et al. 2017b, 80). Church and religion remained a significant part of the personal lives of many in Yugoslavia. Church weddings were not unusual, even among Communist Party members.[3] If one of the parents was a Party member, the last pioneers often rushed to clarify that—despite this—they enjoyed no privileges nor advantages, preemptively addressing any suspicion that their affective relationship to socialist Yugoslavia might stem from personal benefits. The need to distance themselves from what is called "the red bourgeoisie" was almost as palpable as the need to distance themselves from Yugonostalgia itself. Zvjezdana continues the story of her mixed family, selecting her words cautiously, exploring her upbringing almost as if she is listening to her own memories for the first time:

> We went to church.... The interesting thing is that my father was a communist in the League of Communists, but he never got any advantages because of it.... He was really an idealist, he believed in that idea.... He got married to my mother in a church, which was considered a scandal, it was considered incredible. They [the Communist Party] interrogated him. My dad was resolute. He told them: "Where is it written in the statutes of the Party? Where does it say that I am not allowed?" ... They didn't know. So, he knew how to defend himself, he kept his position firmly, but he had his convictions.... But it is interesting that he never forbade us to go to church; he used to wake us up for church.

3 The Communist Party of Yugoslavia changed its name to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1952. Nevertheless, in colloquial speech it was still frequently referred to as "the Communist Party," or simply "the Party."

Trying to reconcile the mainstream discourses and their own intimate memories, the last pioneers reinterpret their life stories to make meaning of their identities and Yugoslavia itself beginning with their accounts of early childhood. As ambivalent reflections surface, a key discursive strategy emerges: the *exceptionality* of experience. When struggling to articulate coherent narratives, the last pioneers often shift into elaborate explanations of how their personal experiences—such as religious freedom, for example—were exceptions within what mainstream discourses or their own political positionalities frame as an otherwise repressive environment.

Religious holidays within religious families remain one of the foundations of childhood memories. Depending on the interviewee's current political positionality, these memories are shared as typical of Yugoslav childhoods, or as unique acts of resistance. Borna, a member of parliament from Croatia on the far right of the political spectrum, invited me for coffee in the parliament's café. Enthusiastic and eager to share his childhood stories, he spoke openly—his strong Dalmatian voice carrying across the room, unbothered by the presence of colleagues, journalists, or visitors. A devout Catholic, he recalled: "...We always celebrated, we always celebrated Easter and Christmas. I was always at home. We considered it important. And the majority of others, I won't say everyone, they celebrated, too. My mother would sing Christmas carols.... I know we all sang a bit louder, so that we could be heard." While implying that Christmas carols constituted a tool of resistance in an allegedly oppressive socialist time, Borna also described more mundane childhood problems, such as missing out on events important for a child of a certain age – Sunday morning television. The dissonances of his early socialization, in which watching socialist Partisan movies coexisted with attending Catholic mass, now appear to him as ideological contradictions, though he recounts them with humor:

> I always went to religious education and to Mass on Sundays. And I know that one of my big traumas was, for example, the TV show *Let Us Address You* on Sunday mornings.[4] All the best Partisan movies, *Sutjeska*,[5] *Neretva*,[6]

4 *Dozvolite da se obratimo* (Let us address you), was a television show put on by the Yugoslav People's Army, shown every Sunday morning, always followed by a Partisan movie.

5 *Battle of Sutjeska*, directed by Stipe Delić, is a Yugoslav movie released in 1973. It is considered one of the most successful and expensive Yugoslav film productions. It stars Richard Burton as Tito.

6 *Battle of Neretva*, directed by Veljko Bulajić, is a Yugoslav movie released in 1969. It is the most expensive film to come out of socialist Yugoslavia. Pablo Picasso designed the original poster for the English-language version. It starred Yul Brenner and Orson Welles, among others.

> all those wonders were playing … and I had to go to Mass. I was always angry about it. I would watch it for just a second, and then my mother would make me go to Mass….

Carefully reconciling his innocent childhood troubles with his political viewpoints today, he continues:

> It was never explained to me why I had to go [to Mass], but I understood that… simply, it was what we did…. That is, my family, we are like that; we were different…. In the building [where we lived], the majority were communists [and] there were a lot of Serbs. I felt [different]…. There were, from those people, in the building … I would say, they gave us certain looks.

Borna's memory of *certain looks* is in contrast with the narratives of the other last pioneers, who claim that there was no awareness among the children regarding ethno-national or religious identity. For him, however, this memory—shaped by his family background and heritage—forms a key part of how he remembers his childhood and interprets Yugoslavia today.

Brotherhood and Unity: Interethnic Diversity Within and Beyond the Yugoslav Family

A Yugoslav family is primarily considered to be ethno-nationally mixed, embedded in the prime value of brotherhood and unity, one of the ideological backbones of Yugoslav socialism. The ethno-national diversity of Yugoslav families led to the last pioneers' childhoods being spent throughout Yugoslavia and understanding the Yugoslav space as a single, shared—indeed familial—space.

Between 1953 and 1981, Yugoslavia became increasingly heterogeneous. In almost all republics and autonomous provinces,[7] the share of majority ethno-national group declined (Woodward 1995, 91). Between 1981 and 1991, heterogeneity increased in Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia but decreased in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Woodward 1995, 92), the two republics that would experience the most violent wars of the early 1990s. Because Yugoslavia's censuses allowed citizens to declare their ethno-national identity, the most common way of defining a mixed marriage relied on census

7 Yugoslavia consisted of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Within Serbia, there were two autonomous provinces: Kosovo and Vojvodina.

data. Yet this approach overlooks those people who chose not to declare an ethno-national identity or who identified simply as Yugoslavs, leaving us with an incomplete picture of intermarriage rates. This being said, the data shows that of all marriages registered in Yugoslavia between 1987 and 1989, 13.1% were "mixed," the highest levels being 17.4% in Croatia and 12.9% in Serbia, with strong variations between 4.7% in Kosovo and 28.4% in Vojvodina (Botev 1994, 469).

Already in the 1980s, Montenegrins and Hungarians in Vojvodina had some of the highest intermarriage rates, unlike Kosovo Albanians and Bosniaks. After the wars, the rates of intermarriage plummeted across the (post)Yugoslav space, except in Vojvodina (Lendák-Kabók 2024). Interestingly enough, more than a third of the interviewees came from intermarriages with similar proportions across the former republics. While narrating their childhoods, their mixed family backgrounds were often invoked as key to their claimed open-mindedness, but also as sources of trauma during the dissolution and the wars. Nevertheless, when reflecting on these backgrounds today, our last pioneers still consider them as an advantage, even while acknowledging today's new ethno-national identities. As Bogdan, a local political party member from the central Serbian region of Šumadija, put it: "There is no Yugoslavia today; he [the interviewee's cousin][8] is Slovene, I am Serbian, but we are brothers".

In their narratives, the last pioneers usually claim a complete lack of awareness of ethno-nationality as a meaningful category in their childhoods. This manifested in different ways: some believed that ethno-nationality simply referred to the republic in which one was born; others understood themselves as Yugoslav; and some were aware of their ethno-national background but did not consider it relevant or important. For many, being Yugoslav and being Slovene, Croat, or Serb were not mutually exclusive identities.

Aleksa was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later displaced as a refugee; now, he holds dual citizenship of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sitting in a café in central Belgrade, nervously sipping coffee after recently quitting smoking, he reflects on how intermarriage shaped his childhood. Self-identifying as a communist, with years of left-wing political activism behind him, he reminisces on the imprint of intermarriage in his childhood: "I mean, I come from a mixed marriage.... Dad always spoke Ekavica,[9] wherever we lived.... Mom always spoke Ijekavica,[10] wherever we lived....

8 In the Yugoslav languages, cousins can be referred to as "brother" or "sister."

9 Ekavica is the sub-dialect of the Serbo-Croatian language most widely spoken in Serbia.

10 Ijekavica is the sub-dialect of the Serbo-Croatian language most widely spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro.

Somehow, I did not pay attention to those things. Especially in Mostar, I really had no clue, I really had no clue."

Even when parents transmitted certain memories of inter-ethno-national tensions, these stories typically related to rural areas, where such tensions were undoubtedly more palpable than in urban areas. This was possibly connected to the fact that the prevalence of intermarriages was indeed higher in cities (Lendák-Kabók 2024). Nonetheless, almost all of our last pioneers have no personal recollections of these tensions. What they do remember are their mixed families, or their parents' friends from across Yugoslavia—memories that persist even in later wartime narratives, including accounts of Serbian friends fighting in the Croatian army.[11] Parental stories also included positive recollections of relations between ethno-national groups, especially through a form of mixed kinship: *kumstvo*,[12] a sacred institution in Yugoslav culture. Thus, understanding the diversity of a Yugoslav family in ethno-national, religious, or political terms requires us to expand the understanding of a family beyond the nuclear family. Family extends to godparents, close family friends, and grandparents, forming a wider kinship network that shaped our last pioneers' childhoods.

Grandparents played an active and important role, often living in shared households as the oldest of three generations: grandparents, parents, and the last pioneers. They were regularly the caretakers of their grandchildren while the parents were at work, an option often preferable to kindergarten, or during summer vacations. As witnesses to the dissolution of the First Yugoslavia and participants in, or victims of, the Second World War, grandparents undoubtedly exerted a significant influence on the political socialization of our last pioneers. They added an additional significant layer of intersecting memory narratives, enabling the transmission of post-memory, in the sense developed by Marianne Hirsch (2012). The influence was particularly visible in the post-memory of the Second World War (see chapter 2), but also in the understanding of the ethno-national, religious, and political diversity and social mobility in socialist Yugoslavia, a recurring topic in the last pioneers' shared stories.

How, then, did this diversity shape the indirect socialization of the last pioneers? For our last pioneers, brotherhood and unity was not merely

11 Adjectives like "Serbian" or "Serb"—or any other ethno-national identity of the (post) Yugoslav space—are used here when it is necessary either to transmit truthfully an interviewee's narrative or to ensure the clarity of an argument depicting ethno-national discourses. In all other cases, I refer to the country of residence of the interviewees or subjects being referred to.

12 Serving as a godparent in religious terms or being a marriage witness are social roles that carry high relevance across Yugoslav society, establishing a kinlike relationship between friends.

communist agitprop, but an internalized value: "I really felt that," exclaimed Una, once a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, now living in Vojvodina. Likewise, Adnan, from the Bosniak minority in Serbia, asserts: "It had results." Their memories align with sociological surveys from the late 1980s showing low ethno-national distance among Yugoslav citizens, and with scholarship demonstrating that the wars of the 1990s were not the product of deep-seated ethnic hatreds (Gagnon 2004; Woodward 1995). With rain pouring outside, in a coastal town in Istria, Croatia, David, surrounded by fellow members of his social-movement-turned-political party in a somewhat empty café, reflects on the values he gained growing up in socialist Yugoslavia. Now center-left, he believes that his anti-nationalism is rooted in his childhood, just like all other centrist, center-left, and left-wing pioneers:

> I think that what I gained through education was the biggest value of that whole story [Yugoslavia], and that is not to differentiate people by ethno-nationality, but by their character and who they are in life. That was the biggest value of Yugoslavia: to succeed in raising people who think that way. Now… how many of us there were, I don't know. I was convinced that we were all like that, but over the years, we have become fewer and fewer.

The warmongering of nationalist political elites presented a sharply different reality. In the 1990s, it erupted into aggression and violent incidents that precipitated the formation of amoral communities (Dragojević 2019) and paved the way for a decade of war. Looking back on the dissolution and its aftermath, many of our last pioneers now wonder whether the values they once held so dearly were ever truly within reach, or whether they belonged to the unachievable dreamworld of their childhoods.

Today, however, some right-wing last pioneers do claim that they were already aware of their ethno-nationality as children and equally aware that this was a minority outlook. Borna, the right-wing member of parliament in Croatia who remembered "certain looks" when speaking about his religious upbringing, also underlined that during the 1981 census, at the age of six, he proudly declared himself a Croat, delighting his parents. Almost nervously playing with his coffee spoon, he quickly adds that he is, even as a fervent right-wing nationalist, somewhat *atypical*: he has always had friends from other ethno-nationalities, both in childhood and today. After a sip of coffee, Borna energetically takes his mobile phone out and opens Viber: he starts telling me about a group chat that gathers all his childhood friends—regardless of ethno-nationality—some still living in their hometown in Croatia, others having left during the wars. Through the discursive strategy of *exceptionality*,

Borna resolves the cognitive dissonance between his political positionality and his life story, almost with a sense of urgency distancing himself from his own discourses of ethno-national distance and tensions.

The absurdity of such dissonances echoes through many conversations. In his parliamentary office, Jakov, a left-wing MP from Croatia, originally from Istria but now living in Zagreb, emphasizes the absurdity of ethno-national divisions by commenting on my own surname: "There are a lot of Popovići here in Croatia. Popovići are both Croats and Serbs, village next to village. My deceased grandmother was a Popović from Gospić. I know there are Serbs, but in the first village next to it live Croats." Jakov's words go hand in hand with a famous photograph from a basketball match that took place at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016, when two players with the surname Bogdanović—one from Serbia and one from Croatia—played against each other. The photograph (see figure 1.1) circulated widely in (post)Yugoslav media as an example of the artificiality of divisions between the peoples of the (post)Yugoslav space.



Figure 1.1. Bojan and Bogdan Bogdanović, APA-Images / AFP / Andrej Isaković.

The Yugoslav identity was embedded not only within families, but also within neighborhoods. If one was to live in those magnificent modernist housing blocks—once celebrated as progressive architectural wonders, later emblematic of the distinct grayness of socialist life, and today regaining popularity as the aesthetics of brutalism circulate online—one might consider their very neighborhood to be a mini-Yugoslavia on its own. This

was especially the case if the buildings were mostly populated by the families of employees of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).[13] Anton, a member of a rising left-wing political party, active at the local level in Slovenia's coastal region of Primorska, describes this vividly. It is a warm summer afternoon, and we talk in a distinct mix of Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian in one of Ljubljana's finest garden cafés. Anton extensively describes how his work obliges him to travel across the (post)Yugoslav space, further strengthening his feeling of home in all former Yugoslav republics. He pauses to remember:

> We never knew [which nationalities were in our building].... I lived in a building, in a housing block, where there were all [different] nationalities... all groups that existed in the ex-Yugo... but back then, nobody knew [anyone's] ethno-nationality, who is who, who is what.... Nobody ever asked, 'Where do you work?' or 'Where does your father work? What does he do?' ... We were brought up in this—let's say—Yugoslav spirit of brotherhood [and unity]....

Anton's hometown, however, was no ordinary small town; it hosted JNA barracks. Wherever this was the case, such towns were livelier than their size would suggest, as the JNA stimulated cultural and economic activity. As Anton continues to explain:

> the fact that the JNA was stationed there gave our town, the town I lived in, a certain rhythm of life.... During weekends, everything was full, the cafés were open, a cinema was open, and pastry shops were open, [and] hotels. Now in [the town], there is no hotel. In those times, the hotel was fully booked. That's what I mean when I say the atmosphere was different. [There was] a different rhythm of life.

Unquestionably, the JNA changed its location in the memory of the last pioneers once the wars started. But during their childhoods, it had a positive place in their life stories, further fueling the ambiguity which colors Yugoslav memories. The fractures imposed upon them opened additional space for ambivalence—an ambivalence that recurs throughout their narratives.

In contrast to ethno-national awareness, regional consciousness was prominent for our last pioneers, and remains so to day. Being a Slavonian, an Istrian, or a Dalmatian carried and still carries greater resonance for their identity, always underlining that the difference between regions is at least

13 The Serbo-Croatian for Yugoslav People's Army is *Jugoslovenska narodna armija*, thus the abbreviation used herewith is JNA.

as big as between the republics, or sometimes even bigger. For example, the region of Primorska in Slovenia and the region of Istria in Croatia, the coastal regions of the northern Adriatic Sea, arguably share more similarities than Istria and Slavonia within Croatia. A recurring narrative in both Croatia and Serbia today is that in Split, a car with Zagreb plates is more likely to be damaged than one with a Belgrade registration, such is the intensity of the tensions between the two cities in Croatia.

Andrija is a member of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ),[14] the right-wing political party in Croatia, and a very successful local and regional politician. Having lived in Serbia for a period, he deploys a discursive strategy of exceptionality similar to Borna's, presenting himself as a right-wing figure without ethno-national hostility. As a wedding band rehearsal bangs around us in a café on the outskirts of Zagreb, laughingly, Andrija, a proud *Zagorac*,[15] explains: "It's less of a risk to come to Belgrade and say you are a Croat, than to come to Split and say you are a fan of Dinamo."[16]

Andrej, a well-known member of parliament from a left-wing political party in Slovenia, in his neatly pressed suit, welcomed me into his parliamentary office for the interview. Always smiling, with impeccable manners, he reflected on his regional belonging and the relevance of Yugoslavia for Primorska:

> My region: we call it Primorska.... Primorska was for twenty years under fascism... My grandmother, my grandfather,... when they were kids, everywhere it was written, "Qui si parla soltanto Italiano."[17] They were not allowed to speak Slovenian. And [then we became part of] Yugoslavia.... So then, we could speak Slovenian.... Because of that—How can I put it?—we loved Yugoslavia very much. If it wasn't for Yugoslavia, we would still have been part of Italy, and I wouldn't be able to speak Slovenian now.

The awareness of the historical advantages that antifascist liberation and the creation of Yugoslavia brought to certain regions has not faded. If anything, it reinforces the sense that the regional "we" remains stronger than any ethno-national "we." Continuing with stories from Primorska, the previously mentioned last pioneer, Anton, recounts an anecdote confirming not only the strength of the regional identities, but also the relevance of one's grandparents for early political socialization:

14 *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*.

15 A person from the region of Zagorje in northern Croatia, on the border with Slovenia.

16 Dinamo is one of the two most popular football clubs in Croatia, founded in Zagreb in 1945.

17 "Here we speak only Italian."

> …and I wanted, and my father and mother wanted me, to learn Italian. A small anecdote: I went to one or two classes,… and when I came home … I told my grandfather that I had started to learn Italian.…In a calm tone, he said, 'They beat us to make us learn Italian. I refused to learn it when a gun was pointed at my head … and now you do it voluntarily' [laughter]. That is how I was done with Italian.

The particularities of diverse regional historical and cultural developments, indeed, turned out to be a powerful cohesive element of the Yugoslav identity over an ethno-national one. These shared historical positions further strengthened the Yugoslav peoples through the transgenerational transmissions of the liberation struggle. This became the centerpiece of what was and is considered to be the (post)Yugoslav identity.

Class Diversity: Social Mobility and the Class(less) Society

Aware of the social mobility of their parents' and grandparents' generations, our last pioneers remembered class diversity intersecting with religious and ethno-national cleavages. Always in comparison with the present, discussions of class and the socio-economic situation certainly feel more passionate in Croatia and Serbia, both countries with much bleaker economic outlooks, than in Slovenia. Recalling their Yugoslav childhoods, the last pioneers evoke a sense of calm: their basic socio-economic needs were met, and although class differences existed, they were far less pronounced than today. Luka, a political activist since his teenage years and now a prominent MP for what was once one of Serbia's strongest political parties, is an outspoken critic of the current situation, including within his own party. He invited me to meet him in a busy café in Novi Sad, in Vojvodina. There, he recalled his childhood in his neighborhood in a small Vojvodina town, where he grew up: "There were [people] from the working class—I mean, regular unskilled workers [up] to CEOs. They would have the same type of apartment as the workers." Luka loudly shared his bright insights into the past and the present, as the café bustled with life on a regular Thursday morning.

Discussing Yugoslavia in public spaces proved not to be an issue for any of our last pioneers, except for a handful in Croatia, who would lower their voices when the topic arose. Toward the end of many interviews, especially in Slovenia and Serbia, partners or friends would join us, only to continue the conversation about socialist Yugoslavia and their lives for hours afterward; this was the case with Luka as well. The last pioneers approached

the interviews not only with ease but with a clear eagerness to talk about Yugoslavia through their generational lens. This was the case across all three (post)Yugoslav countries in this book. The famous Balkan hospitality meant that I drank countless coffees, and was sometimes invited also for breakfasts and lunches. Yet, none of these conversations was aimed at recruiting me to their party or their organization; rather, they felt like a continuation of a friendly and trusting talk, just like the interviews themselves. When we parted ways, the last pioneers would always insist on me keeping in touch and asked to receive my book as soon as it was finished.[18]

One might wonder whether it was the absence of a pronounced class society which made the friendliness and closeness between me and these famous and successful politicians possible, or whether it stemmed from our generational proximity. Yet class emerged repeatedly in their life stories, always contrasted with the somber years of dissolution and war, which brought widespread impoverishment across Yugoslav populations. The issue of class was underlined as a discriminatory element exclusively in Slovenia, where, during the socialist Yugoslav period, so-called *Jugovići*[19] were less discriminated against, if at all, when they came from middle-class families. By the end of the 1980s, however, being a non-Slovene from the lower socio-economic classes meant being treated as a second-class citizen (Mežnarić 1986). This dynamic persists today: workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other former Yugoslav republics, continue to suffer from exploitation and discrimination in Slovenia.[20]

In contrast with the sense of class(lessness) in the socialist Yugoslavia, the present-day has brought capitalist class hierarchies in ways the last pioneers did not encounter during their childhoods. Even when the economic and social crisis in the 1980s, induced by tough austerity measures, led to mass unemployment and widespread impoverishment (Archer et al. 2016), our last pioneers retain few memories of the dire situation. Economic hardship is mostly marginalized or forgotten. It becomes relevant only once we engage in broader reinterpretations and analyses of the causes of Yugoslavia's dissolution, remaining largely disconnected from their individual life narratives.

18 I wish here to thank them for their patience.

19 A term used for all non-Slovenian Yugoslav peoples, sometimes considered derogatory. In Slovenia, Bosnian (*Bosanac*) is also used as a generic term for all other Yugoslav peoples, regardless of their precise origin. An even more insulting term, *čefur*, was most commonly used in the 1990s.

20 See the 2025 documentary *The Thing to Be Done* (dir. Srđan Kovačević), which shows the precarious working conditions of migrant workers in Slovenia through the work of the Ljubljana-based office for workers' rights, *Delavska svetovalnica*.

Certainly, the crisis did not affect all families in the same way. Upper-middle class households maintained a relatively comfortable standard of living, sometimes by becoming highly qualified *gastarbeiters*,[21] as Hrvoje explains: "He [Hrvoje's father] worked in Switzerland,… so at some point in 1986, 1987, we were getting cash from Switzerland…. I mean, it wasn't big money, but we could [afford to] go skiing in Switzerland." Today, Hrvoje is an activist within a new left-wing movement that has since turned into a political party; he perceives himself to be on the center-left. A Yugoslav child from central Zagreb, he remembers little of the economic crisis, despite growing up in a rather anti-Yugoslav environment. His sense of what counted as "big money" in the 1980s differs significantly from others.

For working-class families, the group most affected by the economic crash, the 1980s were the beginning of a definite decline. Ivan, who grew up in a small Slovenian town built around a once-successful Yugoslav factory, recalls a very different childhood. Coming from a mixed marriage and now an energetic activist rooted in the workers' left-wing movement, he remembers that skiing in Switzerland was unimaginable even in the best of times; wealth was measured by the ability to buy basic home appliances. The 1980s were definitely an important turning point:

> In the mid-1980s, my father could buy the latest Gorenje washing machine with only one month's salary.[22] A couple of years later, we could not buy anything anymore, not even with a two-year loan. Within a couple of months, the economic situation changed drastically…. The [town] factory almost collapsed [and] 2,000 people lost their jobs. It was an enormous economic system. Before, people came every day by bus from Croatia to work. Everyone was strongly socially connected … [and] on the weekends people played football, basketball, everyone talked to each other. After a couple of years of economic pressure, it all completely changed. There was no one on the playgrounds anymore; they were always empty…. We lived on loans, from month to month, as best as we could, and we were not the only ones. A lot of people were in such a situation,… but, back then, it was considered some sort of private shame. So people, instead of talking [about their problems], withdrew into their families and … the social tissue completely changed…. All of a sudden, no one was there.

21 On *gastarbeiters* in socialist Yugoslavia, see Bernard 2019; Brunnbauer 2019; Žerić and Brunnbauer 2024.

22 Gorenje is a popular Slovenian home appliance and electronics brand; it still exists and its products are sold throughout the (post)Yugoslav space and beyond. Since 2018, it has been acquired by the Chinese appliance giant Hisense.

Just as towns with JNA barracks had been shaped by the presence of the army, towns built around large industrial complexes depended on these factories for their social life. They attracted people from different republics and parts of the country, offered rich cultural and sporting opportunities and served as centers of idealized quality city lifestyle. These establishments were centers for the social cohesion of the towns in question; once they disappeared, one way or another, the towns and their social cohesion withered away with them.

The late 1980s did not shape the Yugoslav childhoods in the same way. Yet there is no straightforward correlation between economic hardship and anti-Yugoslav sentiment within families: it was often the well-off families that were more anti-Yugoslav, rather than the other way around. From the limited results of this research, the workers' families, despite the hardships toward the end, remained more pro-Yugoslav:[23] the social mobility which Yugoslavia provided kept a strong faith in the possible future of the Yugoslav state. The values parents transmitted were simple: the more education one obtained, the less one needed to fear poverty or hunger. This formula collapsed as soon as socialist Yugoslavia dissolved.

Value Transmission Within the (Yugoslav) Family

As they reminisce about the structural diversity in their own family and the families surrounding them, deconstructing what a Yugoslav family means to them, our last pioneers proceed to understand how this specific environment influenced their current political positionalities. Family, both as a communicative framework for memory (Assmann 2011, 21) and as a social group we did not choose, is also understood as our primary site of political socialization. I have chosen to pay closer attention to "the different interpretations and uses of the same nostalgic object at different points in the process of its production, dissemination and reception" (Mihelj 2017, 240). Watching Partisan films with one's family may initially appear as a nostalgic childhood memory; yet over time, as temporal and spatial contexts shift, the same object might acquire new meanings. Allowing nostalgic memories to transform into political reflections within a single narrative provides an analytical lens through which we grasp the polysemic nature of nostalgia and

23 In public discourse and some academic scholarship, the workers' mobilizations in the 1980s (especially before 1989) have often been simplistically portrayed as ethno-nationalist awakenings in the context of the relationship between different classes and Yugoslavism. However, the overall picture was far more complex than that. See Grdešić 2014; Musić 2019; Zajc 2015.

its multiple uses across past and present. The reinterpretation of childhood memories helps to provide a coherent framework for our identity, assuring us that there is a clear path from the day we were born to today, no matter how unclear that path has sometimes seemed to us.

Among right-wing last pioneers, a distinctly gendered pattern emerges. Reflecting on the roots of their ideological stances, they recognize that their political orientation was influenced by their fathers. Dušan's father volunteered as a member of the paramilitary troops under Vojislav Šešelj in the war; he died in the conflict in the early 1990s. For Dušan, this meant that there was never even a question, or a possible choice, for his own political orientation: becoming right-wing and following in his father's footsteps—the footsteps of a nationalist Serbian *hero*—was the only way to defend his family's honor. A similar pattern repeats in Croatia. Borna, the right-wing member of parliament in Croatia, searches for the formative moments in his childhood, when he was six years old:

> I remember 1980.... Now that we discuss this.... Father and I were home alone and I was playing in front of the television with some toy soldiers; the news on the TV began and the presenter said: "Comrade Tito is dead." And I could already understand, so I looked at my father's reaction ... and my father joyfully laughed and said: "So, the chief has died!" And [in] the next scene,... he poured himself some whiskey, or some rakija, and he [gave a] cheer.... He was repeating: "The chief died, the chief died"... happily.

Families and the transgenerational transmission of memories function as key "media of memory" (Olick et al. 2011, 312). Unsurprisingly, this occurs predominantly through the paternal line: it was the fathers and grandfathers who narrated not only the family histories, but also Yugoslav ones. Hrvoje, whose father worked in Switzerland in the late 1980s, is well aware of the anti-Yugoslavism in his family. But in comparison to other left-wing last pioneers, a more critical stance toward Yugoslavia and Yugonostalgia was indeed prominent throughout Hrvoje's life narrative. We spoke in the closed, empty space of a nongovernmental organization in central Zagreb, a setting that seemed to mirror his more distanced relationship with Yugoslavia. He recalled:

> Well, once or twice a year we traveled to Austria, Switzerland, Italy, so I saw ... [that], wow, there were so many colorful things to buy ... and back home, there weren't. It was maybe already 1989, when duty-free shops arrived [in Yugoslavia], and all seemed great to me. So that was a somewhat wrong perception. I thought that all we have is a stale, gray,

> horrible socialism.... Now when I look at those times and I compare them with today, I understand that it was not really like that,... but that is how I always perceived it.

Hrvoje's capacity for introspective reflection on how his family socialization influenced his childhood perceptions—and, furthermore, how his present political positionality anchored his reinterpretation—is shared with his fellow left-wing and centrist last pioneers. Some of the left-wing last pioneers indeed emancipated themselves from their right-wing parents; however, there was not a single case of a right-wing political actor coming from a left-wing family. Sometimes, family heritage did not prove to have the same weight among different people. But more often than not, the generational transmission of memory remained an important part of the constitution of life narratives, even if only as "implicit background narratives" (Connerton 1989, 3).

Growing up in a Yugoslav antifascist family remains a mark of pride. In a café on the Ljubljana fortress, Ivo, a left-wing political party member and activist, recalls:

> Look, in our family it was like this.... We celebrated November 29.[24] We cooked beans; and I remember [watching] Partisan movies on TV—the whole day they would play Partisan movies, *Neretva* and *Sutjeska*—and at home, it was a given that we would watch them.... And my grandfather, he was always recounting his adventures from the times when he was a Partisan because he fought in Lika.[25]

Toward the end of the interview, Ivo's wife joined us; together, they interwove their individual childhood memories into a common family narrative of today, one strongly embedded in their Yugoslav childhoods. As we part ways, Ivo invites me to his birthday party in a café in Ljubljana named—no more, no less—*Nostalgija*.

Specific family circumstances sometimes prompted a shift in perspective, or root individuals in counter-memories and alternative narratives. Arrived soaked from the rain, carrying a box of (Yugonostalgic) Kraš chocolates into the packed Kino Europa café in central Zagreb, Filip—an antifascist activist—recounted his story:

24 November 29 was celebrated as Republic Day in socialist Yugoslavia, commemorating November 29, 1943, when the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) met in Jajce and established the socialist Yugoslav state.

25 Lika is a region in Croatia.

> In high school one thing happened to me.... My mom was fired in 1996, and, of course, I had already changed my opinion during the war about some important ideological issues. Then, in 1996, Mom [who was a judge] was fired because ... [as] it was written in the newspapers, she was passing judgments according to the directives of the UDBA [Directorate for State Security],[26] which was not true.... She was told that we were "Serb-lovers," "*Jugoslovenčine*,"[27]... so in 1996, I radically changed my opinion.... Today, Yugoslavia is presented as a prison of the peoples, as a place where Croats did not have any freedom of speech and where they could not express their Croat identity.... I have at home a photo from 1949.... Both my grandfather and my grandmother stopped being religious during the People's Liberation Struggle [NOB].[28]... They went to war at sixteen years old, as kids. In 1949, they were twenty-four years old and they got married in a church because that was what my grandmother's mom wanted.... Here, we are talking about the time of the Comintern,[29]... times which are considered to be the darkest of all, full of purges. My grandfather was in his JNA uniform next to my grandma, standing in front of the altar in a Catholic church and getting married.... So, to whom are they telling these stories? It was my main argument always. What are you talking about? I know that there were some persecutions and all,... but the way I see it, it would be the same today if I wanted to overthrow the constitutional regime, build explosives, or become a member of a guerrilla group.

Within family frameworks, the new context brought about by Yugoslavia's dissolution generated tensions and prompted (re)interpretations of the past—both externally and internally, within families themselves. Communicative memory "lives in everyday interaction and communication" (Assmann 2010, 111). Throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the last pioneers communicated different memories within their families, within

26 The *Uprava državne bezbednosti* was the state security and secret police in socialist Yugoslavia from 1946.

27 A derogatory form of the word "Yugoslav."

28 *Narodno oslobodilačka borba*. The NOB was the Partisan struggle during the Second World War that led to the creation of socialist Yugoslavia.

29 The Communist International, an international organization advocating for world communism and led by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Comintern was dissolved in 1943. The interviewee here actually had in mind a reference to Cominform, the Communist Information Bureau, formed in 1947 and perceived as a substitute for the Comintern. Yugoslavia was expelled from Cominform in 1948, following the Tito–Stalin split. In colloquial language, "Comintern" is typically used when referring to Cominform and the period of anti-Stalinist repression that followed in Yugoslavia after 1948.

the usual span of three generations identified as the length of communicative memory, noticing the discrepancies and cognitive dissonances regarding the memory of Yugoslavia. Most of the dissonant—or, as interviewees often phrased it , *interesting*—family stories came from Croatia. Sitting in a quiet café in Gornji grad in Zagreb, Vito, a member of a left-wing political party, described these ambiguities: while his mother regularly votes for the right-wing HDZ, she still insists that life was better in socialist times. His father, also a right-wing voter, concealed for years the fact that Vito's grandfather had been a Partisan and his grandmother an active member of the Antifascist Front of Women (AFŽ). In Slovenia and Serbia, parental political affiliations were frequently mentioned as well, except in cases of right-wing paternal heritage. The absence of large-scale violence on their territory during the Yugoslav Wars reduced the force of anti-Yugoslav mainstream narratives, softening the cognitive dissonances within families.

Personal family memories shape our view of the world; in the narratives of the last pioneers, these intimate recollections often stand in firm opposition to mainstream memory discourses and open the space for counter-narratives, both during and after socialist Yugoslavia. The experience of a country becomes measured through a personal story, a photograph, a family member's success or failure, or an injustice felt at close range. Just as migrants carry memories from their homelands to make sense of old and new environments, the last pioneers transferred their memories to the newly created (post)Yugoslav spaces. As the generation of the last pioneers, they became (post)Yugoslav migrants within the (post)Yugoslav space. But what else, in their own eyes, unites them as a generation?

Our Parents Had It All: Transgenerational Envy and Barriers

Becoming a political generation goes beyond the notion of a cohort born within a specific time frame; the members of a generation need to be aware that they share a common experience, a consciousness, and an active political intention (Braungart and Braungart 1986). Our interviewees, well aware of their shared experience, stand united in a shared consciousness of how their Yugoslav past molded their political views, thereby making them members of the generation of the last pioneers.

However, another element kept recurring throughout our talks: the trope that the parents of our last pioneers "had it all", having lived in a time when the future still existed as a meaningful horizon, in narratives colored both by envy and grief. Miloš, born on the Croatian coast whose family moved to Serbia

before the war, comes from a mixed marriage and is today an active trade-union member—one of the rare last pioneers who openly embraces his Yugonostalgia. On a summer day, at another busy café, this time in Kragujevac, he recalls:

> My father told me, "Wait and graduate from university."... While I was still in primary school, he told me to graduate from university.... Well, actually, first finish high school, [and then] go to university. "With your student card, you will be able to travel the world." He told me how he had traveled half[way around] the world. And I said, "Lucky you, great, I can't wait to start studying, so I can also travel the world."... But by 1991 [age sixteen], I knew that it was not going to happen.

Oscillating between jealousy and shame, the relationship of the last pioneers toward their parents' generation becomes fraught as soon as childhood memories surface. Our last pioneers hold their parents accountable for the dissolution of the country, for not sufficiently opposing and stopping the processes that led Yugoslavia into war. Zorana, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, adamantly claims: "I am convinced that there would not have been a war if they had only let my generation grow up." Supported by the belief in their own generation, our last pioneers grieve the lost opportunities for social mobility and *a normal life* (see chapter 2), while their parents *had everything handed to them on a silver platter*.

Karolina, a member of parliament in Serbia, born and raised in Vojvodina, reflected on this rupture in her parliamentary office, speaking with a gentle smile tinged with melancholy: "During Tito's times, they [her parents] got married, got a loan, got a home ... and we [members of the next generation] [were] the poor ones.... I had an impression that for everyone born after 1980, there was no chance to achieve anything, like it was our fault." As we continued our talks with Anton, from the Primorska region in Slovenia, this sentiment is shared:

> I will tell you, from my own experience: my mother finished high school to be a chemist, in Rijeka. She was applying for jobs after, and within four months, she got a job in a factory: not for a trial period, or a month, a real job. She immediately put her name on the waiting list for an apartment from her factory. Within a year [from graduation], she had a job, an apartment, and a car. So, [she became] totally independent.

Both Karolina and Anton share the feeling of impossibility of the ease of life their parents once had; but even more than that, the possibility of a better life, and, as such, hope.

When explaining who they are, the last pioneers refer to the values they have adopted within their Yugoslav families as values which formed them for life, even if, for some, they are in contradiction with their political positionality today. We see how exactly these ambivalences, present from the beginning of the pioneers' stories, open the space for political imaginaries to reflect Yugoslav history through lenses different from the mainstream narratives. Or, as Leonard Cohen would put it: "there is a crack, a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."[30]

And hopeless as things may be, for those who have children, the (post) Yugoslav youth is once again worse off. Not only are they unfamiliar with Yugoslav history and overburdened by ethno-nationalist politics, their very concept of *normality* is different. On a bright spring day in Novi Sad, over many coffees and some beer, Jovan—formerly active in a Vojvodina political party and a long-time antifascist activist—voiced his concerns: "They don't know what it [Yugoslavia] is. So, today, when you go to Slovenia, you have to pass the Croatian border and then the Slovenian and you show your passport.... It is normal for them. For me, it is not normal."

For the last pioneers who are parents today, particularly mothers, there is a conscious effort to instill Yugoslav values in their children. Remembering their own stress-free childhoods, they regret that their children cannot share this experience amid the tensions of contemporary (post)Yugoslav societies. Zvjezdana, the Catholic social democrat from Slavonia, explained while rocking her baby to sleep:

> I believe that some of those values, even, so to say, the values of communism, could be redefined and actually be [welcome].... I don't know how it went with the acronym PIONIR [pioneer][31]... fair, honest, loyal, progressive, hardworking.... Those are all universal values. I raise my children in the same manner ... and they don't even know who the pioneers were. I believe that all of those values are still much needed. And I think that, today, those values have vanished.

Despite her complex family history, anticommunist uncles, and her religious upbringing, Zvjezdana feels there is no question about the universality of pioneer values. And these values remain Yugoslav, just as the (post)Yugoslav

30 A verse from Leonard Cohen's song "The Anthem."

31 The backronym formed from the word "pioneer" comprised values that were supposed to make one a pioneer: PIONIR meant "*pošten, iskren, odvažan, napredan, istrajan, i radan*": fair, honest, courageous, progressive, tenacious, and hard-working (author's translation into English).

space continues to sustain proximities, including linguistic ones. Vito, the left-wing last pioneer from Zagreb, describes how his toddler daughter watches (post)Yugoslav cartoons on the internet: "My daughter then says: 'Let's go, *napolje*!'[32] We never say this. She got it from the cartoons, just like she picks up English. So, I see that the connection is strong and will not be cut so easily."

The last pioneers' earliest childhood memories invoke the Yugoslav atmosphere in which their earliest political socialization took place. As children of socialism and solidarity, they have grown in the richness of diversity of Yugoslav families, with both religious and political pluralism, and, moreover, class mobility standing as hallmarks of the society at the time. Any contradictions with their political positionality today are resolved through strategies of exceptionality of their childhood experiences. Yet the idiom of brotherhood and unity continues to resonate as a fundamental value—transmitted across generations by their *fortunate* parents and grandparents, and now, in turn, by them to their own children.

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32 *Napolje* would be considered a more Serbian word, while *vani* would be considered a more proper Croatian version of the word "outside."

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2. "When People Lived and Worked": The Concept of a Normal Life

Abstract: Chapter 2 explores the notion of a "normal life" as a key interpretative lens through which the last pioneers remember socialist Yugoslavia, beyond the ritual of becoming a pioneer. Through memories of schools, neighborhoods, safety, solidarity, and work, the chapter shows how normality functions as a moral and political benchmark against which the postsocialist present is evaluated. Rather than idealizing the past uncritically, interviewees articulate ambivalences and emerging cognitive dissonances, questioning the ownership and authenticity of their memories. The chapter argues that normality is not merely nostalgic sentiment but a relational concept that structures critiques of neoliberal precarity, social fragmentation, and political disempowerment.

Keywords: normal life; everyday socialism; solidarity; cognitive dissonance; memory narratives; post-socialist critique

Different generations encompass different concepts of normality. Our last pioneers seem entirely aware of the roots embedded in their Yugoslav families, with the full meaning of the panorama of diversities it brought upon their childhoods, as well as the differences with both their parents and their children. But political socialization also takes place beyond the family; in school, through media, and within society itself, across a multiplicity of social interactions. Stories that the last pioneers shared appear as glimpses into their childhood, an attempt at comprehending what it meant to grow up in Yugoslavia. How did the last pioneers experience their pioneer days? Were they influenced by the ideological teachings at their schools? How did the values instilled by the socialist society transfer into their present lives, and the construction of their own concept of a normal life?

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Marta offers the simplest summary of the period: those were the times "when people lived and worked." Living today in Dalmatia as a left-wing NGO activist, she considers the value of her childhood years as self-evident, sharply contrasted with the gloom of the present. Growing up in Yugoslavia produced shared values, experiences, expectations, and interpretations: all the elements that are essential for the creation of a common culture (Assmann 2008) and a political generation. A common Yugoslav culture undoubtedly existed, and it still exists. An idea still so vivid within a society, even if it only survives through memories, cannot be erased by simple negation. As early impressions tend to coalesce into *a natural view of the world* (Mannheim 1952, 298), the last pioneers grew up in a Yugoslav world. For Mateja, a left-wing party member and feminist activist from the region of Istria in Croatia, this meant acquiring a sense of purpose: "From an early age, you learn that it makes sense to create and to work. It is extremely, extremely important."

Yugoslav Schools

Schools in the late 1980s and 1990s were spaces in which the old official discourses were dissolving while the new ones remained chaotic and only partially formed, leaving the educational system far from hegemonic. Ethno-nationalism promoted by political elites had begun to filter into classrooms, but not yet in a systematic or coherent manner. As a result, the dominant messages depended largely on individual teachers. Some continued to emphasize antifascism and Yugoslavism amid the escalating crisis, others avoided the sensitive topics of the Second World War and Yugoslavia altogether, and still others embraced the newly emerging ethno-nationalist narratives.

But in earlier times, the official discourses followed a clearer line, providing a coherent value framework. In its program from 1958, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia declared the primary values as the following: "The new social role of factories, cooperatives, communes, schools, social organizations, and families consists in development of *the relations of honesty, trust, humanism, understanding, tolerance, cooperation, and assistance*; in a word, people's sympathies and camaraderie between peoples" (Savez komunista Jugoslavije 1965, 44; emphasis added). Even if those words were drafted two decades before our last pioneers were born, they echoed through the overall symbolic framework of the socialist Yugoslav society long after. These values kept reappearing in our last pioneers' stories: while

undeniably universally resonant, they are nevertheless portrayed as specifically *Yugoslav values*. In schools, a collective Yugoslav identity—whether or not we interpret it as a deliberate project of the Yugoslav regime—was promoted through solemn rituals and the pledge of the pioneer organization. The last age cohort who attended and became members of the Yugoslav pioneer organizations were born in 1982, becoming pioneers in 1989. This moment marked their childhoods through its symbolic weight and its role. It functioned as the start of the "ideological and political socialization" and "the ritual of maturing" (Duda 2015, 110). To become a pioneer meant to become Yugoslav; to become a citizen.

The significance of this rite of passage is evident in the fact that the trope of pioneers is repeated throughout narratives on Yugoslavia and media accounts of Yugoslav times. The pioneer outfit remains a popular choice for Yugonostalgic parties and waiters' outfits in nostalgic cafés, even in places outside Yugoslavia, such as Vienna. Pioneer values, rooted in socialist principles, formed the core of the moral framework adopted in Yugoslav childhoods and continue to function as a wishful value horizon in the present. The pioneer's pledge changed throughout Yugoslav history, but the last known version reads as follows; even if it remains unclear if the very same version was used across all schools in Yugoslavia (Duda 2015, 133):

Today when I become a pioneer,
I give my solemn pioneer word:

that I will study and work diligently,
and I will be a good friend;

that I will love our self-managing country,
the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia;

that I will promote brotherhood and unity,
and the ideas for which Tito fought;

that I will respect all people of the world
who want freedom and peace![1]

1 The original in Serbo-Croatian is as follows: "Danas kada postajem pionir, dajem časnu pionirsku riječ: da ću marljivo učiti i raditi i biti dobar drug; da ću voljeti našu samoupravnu domovinu, Socijalističku Federativnu Republiku Jugoslaviju; da ću razvijati bratstvo i jedinstvo i ideje za koje se borio Tito; da ću cijeniti sve ljude svijeta koji žele slobodu i mir!"

Promising to study and work hard, to be a good friend, to respect others, and to promote peace and solidarity: these, the last pioneers insist, have remained their moral guidelines throughout their lives. The ritual of becoming a pioneer is remembered fondly by most Yugoslav generations. Antea, a left-wing party member in Split, captures the essence: "If being a pioneer meant anything to me then, it meant to be a part of a community that goes forward." Our last pioneers recall the event as solemn, celebratory, and emotionally positive—or at worst, neutral. The memory often prompted them to recite the pledge, with varying degrees of accuracy. The very topic of our discussions inspired the interviewees to bring personal memorabilia (see figure 2.1): a pioneer book, photographs, small tokens of childhood. Considering the dynamics of the interviews and their prior, if sometimes vague, knowledge of the topic, these stories were told by those who wished to remember—those whose nostalgia was waiting to be awakened, who did not hesitate to share their memories and to inscribe themselves into a generational narrative.

Through continuous "dialectical articulation" (Mannheim 1952, 298), the last pioneers created their memory narratives, between appropriated memories and personally acquired memories (Mannheim 1952, 296), mediated many times through multiple filters: family environments, schools, textbooks, (history) teachers, and later revisionist political discourses and media. The solemn day of becoming a pioneer was understood as an obligatory part of the school routine, compared to habitual practices like Christmas, yet it felt like an initiation event. For some pioneer girls, it was annoying that they were obliged to wear a skirt, as the pioneers' uniform was strictly gendered like other school uniforms of that time. Still, not a single interviewee forgot the event. It was a family occasion, almost always photographed, preserved in family albums, and transformed into a material object of memory.

On all sides of the political spectrum, in all three countries, the pioneer identity was considered *normal.* Dominik, a member of parliament for the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), invited me for coffee once again in the parliament café in Zagreb, which I visited so many times. He arrived rushed and overwhelmed with many obligations. Still, he was seemingly happy to participate, on several occasions almost confessing his hidden nostalgia, even if he expressed himself as openly anti-Yugoslav. When thinking about his pioneer identity, he claimed: "Whatever I think about that country [today], it was an important part of the identity." This reveals yet another ambivalent reflection from a political actor—one that would never be voiced in public discourse and remains confined to private thoughts and conversations.



Figure 2.1. Mojca's pioneer schoolbook, from Primorska region in Slovenia, author's archives, 2017.

Schools functioned as the connecting spaces between the Pioneer Alliance, the pioneers and their parents (Duda 2015, 21), even if they were less influential in transferring value frameworks than the family environment. The Pioneer Alliance of Yugoslavia, officially founded in 1942 in Bihać, survived longest in Slovenia and Croatia (Duda 2015), curiously enough. As Yugoslavia was withering away, so were the activities and importance of the Pioneer Alliance, including the diminution of their property. From the ninety-nine pioneer summer camps that existed in the 1950s, by the 1980s

only ten remained (Duda 2015, 192). In 1990, all existing Pioneer Alliances at the federal and republican level were abolished. While Ildiko Erdei claims that the main task of the Pioneer Alliance was to produce *happy children of socialism* (Erdei 2004), by the 1980s it would be misleading to give such a prominent role to the Alliance. When the last pioneers were growing up, the ideological apparatus of Yugoslav regime was already on the decline, if ever such a true intention existed and/or was successfully implemented. Still, childhood memories of the last pioneers do seem to confirm that they were happy.[2]

The diversity of the families, as discussed earlier, played a role in the development of a sense of what it meant—and still means—to be a Yugoslav. Seeing diversity at home spilled over into seeing diversity at school. In a café in Split, Antea—originally from Zagreb—reflected on the significance of school socialization: "I think … if you learn to write two alphabets[3]… from the beginning, you see your own identity differently, than if you learn only one." For Antea, the importance of Yugoslav values was at the core of her identity. Belonging to the "older" group of the generation of the last pioneers, she spent a longer time in socialist Yugoslavia and her political socialization in her narrative seems to have left more entrenched traces. Extracurricular activities like choir or painting were organized by and in schools; they were free and accessible to all, in contrast with today's commercialization of schools and other educational activities, as underlined by many of our last pioneers. In addition to extracurricular activities, there were also Yugoslav-wide school competitions under the heading "On Tito's Revolutionary Paths" (*Titovim stazama revolucije*), based on knowledge of socialist Yugoslav history and the Second World War. School memories are filled with traveling and school exchanges, as with Yugoslav national holidays like May 25,[4] November 29, or the day when Tito died, May 4. A minute of silence on May 4, taking place throughout Yugoslavia, remained vivid in the memories of our last pioneers. All of these holidays occur more often in pioneers' stories than religious holidays, but almost as often as sporting events and major tournaments which Yugoslavia won. The recurrence of sporting events in

2 A documentary film, directed by Igor Mirković and produced by Rajko Grlić, was released in 2003 in Croatia under the title *Sretno dijete* (Happy child), depicting the authors' adolescence in Yugoslavia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, shaped by the alternative music and cultural scene that was on the rise at that time. The film depicts the socialist Yugoslav period just as the last pioneers were being born.

3 During their Serbo-Croatian language classes in school, children were taught both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets.

4 May 25 was Youth Day, as well as Tito's (unofficial) birthday.

memory narratives is especially true among our male pioneers, once again showing the gendered early socialization of the Yugoslav times.

Tito appears in school memories primarily as a trope—indirectly, through related activities or his picture on the classroom wall—rather than as a prominent political or ideological figure. While, for some, their first childhood memory is the day Tito died, Titostalgia (Velikonja 2010) is not a strong feature of this generation's memory narratives. This is linked both to their generational location and to the success, and failure, of efforts to dismantle Tito's personality cult in the post-1990 era (Pavasović Trošt 2020). The very idea of a personality cult is almost unanimously criticized, even though memories of school plays, or writing songs for Tito, persist.[5] Tito was part of Yugoslav childhood scenery and rituals, yet today he is considered more like as a brand, a commercialized symbol. The tabloids exposing Tito's "real identity," alleged secrets, or supposed crimes, along with sensationalist magazine covers, pocket editions, and television documentaries, have not captivated the last pioneers. For them, such commodification attempts are irrelevant, neither socially meaningful nor identity forming. Instead, Tito is appreciated as a historical figure who participated in the creation of Yugoslavia and as a leader who brought respect to Yugoslavia on the international stage, through the Non-Aligned Movement. He was, as Jovan from Novi Sad tells us, "the only symbol of Yugoslavia, … a real, unifying one."

The only opposing example comes from right-wing last pioneers, especially in Slovenia. While they often dismiss Yugonostalgia as a covert form of Titostalgia, they nonetheless devote more time to discussing Tito than any other group. Franc, a right-wing conservative last pioneer from Slovenia—another one following his father's political orientation—arranged our meeting in a café on the outskirts of Ljubljana. He arrived cheerful and eager to participate, opening the conversation with: "My wife asked me if I wanted a beer after dinner, and I told her, 'No, I am off to have a beer with a Serb!'"[6] Franc made a significant effort to speak in Serbo-Croatian, even

5 It is interesting to note that the personality cult was institutionalized only in 1984, through the adoption of a law on the use of the name and image of Josip Broz Tito. All previous manifestations were rather bottom-up initiatives, sometimes embedded in continuity: the Youth Baton, initiated by the citizens of Kragujevac in 1945, continued the tradition from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia since 1934, where it was initiated by the monarchists in Sarajevo and organized in honor of the King (Radanović 2014).

6 Despite my personal rejection of any ethno-national identification, given my very typical name and surname for what is considered as Serb ethno-nationality in the (post)Yugoslav space and the fact that I was born and raised in Belgrade, once the capital of Yugoslavia and today the capital of Serbia, I was—and always am—marked as a Serb.

after I explained that I can fully understand Slovenian. Uncovering less his childhood than his political analysis of socialist Yugoslavia, Franc showed a strong ambiguous admiration for Tito. Smiling broadly, he explained: "He [Tito] succeeded in everything, everything! As a politician, he was a genius. I admit that. He was a dictator, and a marvelous dictator … And then when all this … then all these nationalisms, which were wrongly suppressed before, when they exploded; then the slaughter happened, I don't know … restless Balkans." Despite his fervent anticommunism, Franc transmitted regret of how the absence of a *marvelous* dictator led to wars, immersing himself into Balkanism in his search for an explanation of the conflicts.

In sum, Tito proved to be only a minor reference in our last pioneers' stories. The absence of Tito, or Titostalgia, not only reflects generational shift in memory narratives, but also strengthens the claim of the expansiveness of the socialist Yugoslav narrative beyond its leader and lifelong president. To be Yugoslav, or even Yugonostalgic, does not require being Titostalgic; nor does being Titostalgic necessarily imply a broader attachment to Yugoslavia.

Happy Childhoods, Safe at Home

Memories of safety and freedom form one of the strongest threads in the last pioneers' recollections of childhood. Vuk, an independent member of parliament in Zagreb, articulates this vividly as he searches for the roots of these feelings:

> That [Yugoslav] childhood was connected to school, family, and safety in public spaces. We were not afraid that anyone would harm us. The world was ours. And it seems to me that [today] Yugoslavia is perceived as a country lacking in freedoms, but it did not develop enmity within. There were foreign enemies, but in my childhood internal enemies were already silenced.

As Vuk continued to reflect on his extensive story, I found myself wondering where this sense of safety and trust came from. These members of parliaments, public officials, well-known public figures—people whose professional lives depend on the careful calibration of their words—met me in cafés and public spaces, speaking openly, placing personal trust in me as a researcher to record their stories. The trust embedded in their happy Yugoslav childhoods seemed to carry across generations and into the very texture of our shared conversations.

At a certain point in our exchanges, I would pause and ask them—almost as if playing a game of free association—to name the first thing that comes into their mind when remembering their (Yugoslav) childhoods. Without thinking, the last pioneers would exclaim: ease, carefree, safety, happiness, optimism, and solidarity. The terms *carefree* and *safety* appeared most frequently. Stepping away not only from revisionist mainstream discourses of "dark" Yugoslav times, but also from their own public personas, these encounters gave "voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless, even if not traceless" (Connerton 1989, 18): a different history of socialist Yugoslavia.

When we remember our childhoods, we remember our homes. As we grow, our home extends to schools, playgrounds, and, through travel, to new encounters with what lies beyond it. The foreign lands stood in strong contrast with home, not (only) in the positive light projected within the hegemonic discourse. While sipping coffee in Split, on the Adriatic coast, Marta remembers one of her childhood trips to Czechoslovakia, then also a communist country:

> There was a queue in front of a pastry shop, a million people waiting for some cakes.... We never had that. Then you come to a great bar, [but] they only had beer. And then you see people nicely dressed, taking home five liters of beer, serious alcoholics.... Some real misery and pain, making your heart clench. For me, it was the first time in my life that I saw a man dig down into a garbage bin. I came from Yugoslavia.... [I]t was the first time I'd seen such a thing in my life.

For Marta, this memory reinforced her belief in the uniqueness of socialist Yugoslavia, especially in comparison with other communist countries of the Cold War era. More often, however, the last pioneers' gaze turned toward the West, as they typically traveled to neighboring Western countries such as Austria or Italy. But for children, Yugoslavia was already a beautiful and vast country; its expanse is often compared with the sense of claustrophobia associated with today's (post)Yugoslav small states. The more the pioneers traveled, the stronger their attachment to a Yugoslav identity appears. Travel functioned as a cohesive force, almost as powerful as the networks of family and parental friendships that stretched across the former country—networks that often enabled such mobility in the first place. This mobility, in its broadest sense, was a defining feature of Yugoslav childhoods. Yet today, as Marta notes, "those people [their family's Kosovo Albanian friends] need a visa to come here." The dissolution of Yugoslavia built borders between a once unique space and between peoples. Remembering Yugoslavia, for the

last pioneers, means remembering the largeness of their childhood world, the breadth of diversity they once experienced, and a life lived without borders.

The main symbol of Yugoslav childhoods, the Adriatic Sea, was the meeting place of people across the Yugoslav republics, especially during summer holidays. For our last pioneers, these summer vacations, today inaccessible to many, evoked the smell of pine forests, the sound of crickets and friendships or first loves with children from other republics.[7] In their adolescence, these romantic affections turned often into a resistance strategy against the ethno-nationalisms and wars. Several female pioneers evoked how, both during and after the war, they would continuously fall in love with people behind "enemy" lines. Through laughter, they reflected on the significance of these recurring choices. For them today, it appears as a subconscious yet intentional politics of love: a youthful declaration that they rejected imposed nationalisms and believed that love mattered more than hatred.

Yet the love that the Adriatic coast symbolized in their childhoods has today been transformed into a neoliberal commodity of mass tourism. The last pioneers from Croatia often intertwined their memories of summer holidays in Yugoslavia with comparisons between past and present tourism, largely recognizing the advantages of the Yugoslav model. Safety, one of the strongest associations with Yugoslav childhoods, including the freedom to travel alone as a child and the certainty that help could be found anywhere—has dissolved into unaffordable luxury resorts and the hostility of strangers.

The sense of safety particularly shifted for women. Safety understood as freedom appeared almost unanimously in the narratives of female last pioneers, contrasted with the present-day realities of re-patriarchialized societies. The positive effects of women's emancipation during the communist era are not unique to Yugoslavia, but have been observed in other postsocialist countries as well (Ghodsee 2004, 2018). Being safe and free also meant growing up surrounded by strong women in their families, who served as examples and were commonly evoked in pioneers' life stories.

The Concept of a Normal Life

Across the (post)Yugoslav space, when talking about their life stories and the "times before" (Jansen 2005, 13), nostalgic memories often crystallize into what some scholars understand as "only a place of lost normal life"

7 On tourism in socialist Yugoslavia, see Grandits and Taylor 2010.

(Spasić 2003, 100), defined as "material well-being; peace; open borders and international recognition of the country and its citizens; stability of the institutions and basic social frameworks" (Spasić 2003, 101).

In a café in the center of Kragujevac, the largest city of central Serbia, I speak with Miloš, a trade unionist from a mixed marriage. Throughout his narrative, Miloš weaves together nostalgia for Yugoslav times with palpable anxiety about his children's future. Invoking the concept of the normal life that once existed, he clarifies: "Everything is nice, everything is normal. You work, you earn money, you have a good time, you have a future, you have a vision of a future, and you plan a family."

The way we conceptualize a normal life, a normative category considered to be self-evident, is through political concepts and specific political regimes: a mono-ethnic state or a multiethnic state; a capitalist or a socialist regime; and so forth. Finding a job that provides a decent wage, living in peace and prosperity, and being able to plan for the future constitute essential elements of a "normal life": a life one chooses through preferences in the political field, through specific ideological frameworks, and through one's own political positionality. Detaching the notion of a "normal life" from politics would render politics devoid of substantive meaning, reducing it to a mere struggle for power among elites. One cannot imagine "normality" without the possibility of a future and, as such, a politics that can provide for that future.

For our last pioneers, the final days of normality were indeed lived in socialist Yugoslavia, in their childhoods. As other research has shown, this sense of normality was a trans-generational and trans-class sentiment, reflected also in political subjectivity: workers at the Jagodina Cable Factory, for instance, built their nostalgic narratives around memories of being active "actors of modernization" (Petrović 2017, 21). For *children of socialism*, normality was often expressed through societal and political values—such as the antiracism they were taught in school—in stark contrast to today's more right-wing and racist environments. Their understanding of normality is unthinkable under neoliberal capitalism, which they view as rejecting social equality and social justice. They emphasize the right to healthcare, education, public housing, social mobility, women's emancipation, and gender equality as essential societal demands. Equally central are the values of antifascism and antinationalism, embodied in the ideal of brotherhood and unity. They recall being encouraged to think critically, to be modest and anti-materialist, to value family, and to believe that hard work would yield results. But first and foremost, our last pioneers remember being taught that solidarity was the principal value, encompassing togetherness, collectivism, and camaraderie.

This solidarity, in turn, produced a sense of freedom, a freedom experienced as safety. For Marta from Croatia, this meant that there was no homelessness in Yugoslavia.[8] For Aleksa, a multiple refugee now living in Belgrade, values he was exposed to in his childhood left a significant impact on his life as an adult. Not only did he become a communist himself, he also made the decision to abandon his studies in the United States, which would have led to a very successful and profitable employment, and instead return to the (post)Yugoslav Serbia. The harsh neoliberal capitalist reality of the United States conflicted with his Yugoslav socialization: "I am simply not used to that.... I am not used to the misery and poverty of the majority, I am not used to exploitation, I am not used to competition. I mean, I really am not used to competition. I feel disgusting whenever I have to compete with someone for something." Fidgeting after another sip of coffee, Aleksa continued to explain, almost in disbelief at his own words: "We lived in a country where the political subject was the working people,... in a country where a director was not allowed [to earn] more than a couple of times the salary of a cleaning lady."

Ideas inherited from Yugoslav socialism, including self-management, brotherhood and unity, and women's emancipation, were also identified in previous research as the backbone of the counter-memory of (post)Yugoslav activists standing "against new hegemonic national narratives centered on ethnic homogeneity and based on the rehabilitation of anti-communist collaborationist forces" (Bonfiglioli 2016). For left-wing political actors, Yugoslav socialism itself represents a value of normal life. The heritage of an autonomous and autochthonous socialist revolution, a successful revolutionary struggle as well as liberation of the country from the Nazi occupation and domestic collaborationists, are all regularly evoked in their life stories. From discussions of childhood onward, the intersections between political positionality and identity become visible. Our left-wing last pioneers, regardless of their critical outlooks on the Yugoslav regime, strongly believe their political identity today emerged as a result of their Yugoslav childhoods, and that their activism was a response to the ethnonationalisms of the Yugoslav dissolution and the neoliberal policies of the (post)Yugoslav transitions which clashed with their concept of a normal life.

Normal life meant being able to go on summer vacations, sometimes even within single-salary households, whereas such holidays today remain unattainable dreams, especially for families. The parents of the last pioneers were able to meet their children's basic needs and further nurture their potential.

8 On housing policy in socialist Yugoslavia, see Archer 2013; Archer 2018b; Horvat 2024.

The idea of *having a chance* appeared more than once as a reference of what it meant to live in Yugoslavia: Zorana from Serbia referred to it as "a space in which you had a chance," while Dora from Croatia stated that "Yugoslavia gave us all a chance. It simply seemed to me that in Yugoslavia you could be whatever you wanted, and that today you cannot be anything." Vuk, the independent MP from Croatia, further reflected on a future once promised: "What was interesting for us as children … [was that] there were no enormous material differences. We all went through the same collective cults, from pioneers to coupons for coffee. Now, was it about the same chances, or was it about the same limitations?" Throughout our long conversation, Vuk, just like many of our last pioneers, remained undisturbed by the noisy surroundings, following a path of self-reflexivity, thinking aloud rather than providing definitive answers, all the while participating in the co-creation of knowledge. Whether understood as chances or limitations, the sense of equality among children of all ethno-national backgrounds and all classes stands out as one of the last pioneers' key memories.

For the last pioneers' parents, owning a house, buying a summer house, having a car, or even purchasing home appliances on a single blue-collar salary were considered normal. The capitalist promise of abundance was never fulfilled, and the socialist minimum now appears unattainable. The sentiment of safety, often narrated as one of the key memories of Yugoslav times, goes beyond physical well-being; it also refers to the safety of a future. When discussing the socio-economic conditions of their childhood, the last pioneers state that "we had everything we needed"; "we did not miss anything"; "there was not much in abundance but there was enough of everything"; "there were fewer needs, but greater satisfaction"; "you could not get rid of the postman, who was always bringing some money"; and so on. In each statement about how things were, there is at least one reflection on how they are today, in terms of what has been lost. Reminiscing upon their childhoods, they appear "unreal," "unimaginable," "like a dream": a very concrete dream. Despite his firm critiques of the socialist period, Bogdan, from central Serbia, succinctly put it like this: "The Yugoslav dream: eight hours of work, eight hours of culture, and eight hours of sleep."

Normal life also encompassed the perception of a functional state. Yugoslavia is remembered—despite its contradictions—as a state that worked: not only one that enabled the possibility of a dream but also one perceived as just and moral. What does this mean? According to our last pioneers, political representatives in Yugoslavia commanded more respect than any current political actors, a paradox the political actors themselves readily acknowledge. Tijana is a vocal center-liberal party member and an activist

since her high school days in Belgrade. By her own admission, she spent more time on the streets protesting than being a regular teenager. Sitting in yet another loud and smoky café in New Belgrade, Tijana constantly expressed stronger concern with the legacy of the 1990s and the missed opportunities of the 2000 regime change than with socialist Yugoslav history. Despite her family background—her grandfather was a prominent Party figure—she showed little personal interest in the past. Not feeling nostalgic, Tijana criticized the socialist society and stood firmly against the idea of the socialist regime. Nevertheless, she acknowledged the positives. Reflecting on her childhood, she asserted: "It is a fact that … in that Yugoslavia, you did not have people you were ashamed of. You did not have [politicians with] fake diplomas."[9] Regardless of the criticism, for her, Yugoslavia was a normal, serious state, in contrast to today's (post)Yugoslav states, often referred to as the "periphery of the periphery."

Normality was thus not limited to the material benefits of late socialism, as nostalgia is often portrayed today (Dimitrijević 2017). Yugoslav society is remembered as a society of progress. Sitting in Split, surrounded by the smell of the sea and the pine trees, Antea pointed out that two key ideas shaped her childhood—ideas absorbed from school and the broader environment rather than her family: "the idea of progress, and the idea that there is more that connects us [the Yugoslav peoples] than separates us." This progress was reflected in social mobility, as many of the last pioneers referred to their families' social progress. Most of them are highly educated, while many of their grandparents had only primary schooling. Miloš, an outspoken Yugonostalgic, recalled the progress he had been socialized to see as part of normal life, as was the case for almost all left-wing last pioneers: "From a practically demolished country, Yugoslavia turned into a highly developed country, and they [the political elites of the 1990s] have demolished a highly developed country."

Dejan, on the older side of the last pioneers, and exceptionably knowledgeable about socialist history, is a left-wing activist. Having experienced life as a refugee, he has since settled in Belgrade, all the while maintaining strong connections with his republic—now state—of birth. Struck by melancholy, Dejan explained how this idea of progress has been lost since the socialist times: "Now imagine, I don't know, when today they justify the

9 Several prominent Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) leaders and ministers in recent governments in Serbia have been accused of diploma plagiarism, which has been confirmed through thorough investigative journalistic work. Similar incidents have been recorded in other (post) Yugoslav countries and beyond.

backwardness and social misery in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the wars of the 1990s.... That war ended twenty-two years ago. Imagine if someone in 1967 justified any social problem with the Second World War.... People would look at him like a fool."

Normality and progress are intrinsically connected to the political and economic significance of socialist Yugoslavia and to the ideas of those times. The Non-Aligned Movement, for instance, was, repeatedly described as the most progressive idea of the twentieth century—and yet one almost entirely forgotten today. Even so, only three of our last pioneers described Yugoslavia as a utopia. For most, it may have been "the golden age of the Balkans," or "the peak of civilization in this region," formulations that retain certain Balkanist inflections, but it was not a utopia. By clearly distinguishing between a utopia and a country that actually existed, their narratives avoid overt nostalgia and instead take the form of political reflections on the past and on their own life (hi)stories.

As ambivalent as they may be toward the Yugoslav past, the last pioneers acknowledge the failure of (post)Yugoslav states to provide *normality*. Across the entire political spectrum, they compare today's lack of social justice and public services to the socialist Yugoslav state. A recent tragedy in Serbia illustrates this starkly. The Novi Sad train station, built in 1964 by renowned modernist architects Imre Farkaš and Milan Matović, required renovation. Yet the works lasted more than two years (2021–2024), and the station was ceremonially opened twice for political purposes. On November 1, 2024, its concrete canopy collapsed, killing sixteen people. The last pioneers often remarked—almost with premonition—that the only functioning infrastructure in the (post)Yugoslav states was built during socialist Yugoslavia. The collapse of the renovated canopy and its devastating consequences came to symbolize for them the collapse of the entire (post)Yugoslav Serbian state itself.

(The Normality of) Solidarity

Regardless of their place of residence, country of origin, class, or gender, solidarity was the primary value invoked by the last pioneers. For Una, solidarity was a value inherited from her parents. They "truly felt that ... the solidarity they lived in their everyday lives and everything that was built through that revolution, or actually that war [Second World War]... [was] a common struggle, a shared [effort] to build the country." Likewise, for Mateja, solidarity was a value she acquired in her Yugoslav childhood:

"That minimal amount of solidarity, or that international solidarity, or actually the belief that it is alright to cooperate with your neighbors,… that you should take care of the ones who have nothing.… I definitely took it with me from there and it definitely has to do with Yugoslavia." For the last pioneers, solidarity was woven into the very foundation of Yugoslavia.

Peter, a long-time left-wing activist who later became a member of a political party and after our interview, a member of parliament, invited me for coffee in the garden of a museum café in Ljubljana. Without hiding his admiration for socialist Yugoslav society, he elaborated:

> The state was built on solidarity, on self-contributions, on work, on working brigades.… Those were not artificial.… They were not some artificial creation. That state was built by the people. That … would not have been possible if only ten people, some army commanders from Belgrade, decided to do it, no.… But the action came from the people. The action … the state was built from the bottom up. The action was by the peoples.

Through his narrative, Peter defied the discourses portraying Yugoslavia as imposed from Belgrade by a small group of communist leaders, instead emphasizing its collective, bottom-up character. In Slovenia, Kenan, a workers' rights activist, shared his life (hi)story in the cold premises of a squatted social center, echoing what Una, Mateja, and Peter had already shared: "Back then, everyone was a comrade. Maybe socialism taught me that there is friendship,… that there is some trust between people that builds solidarity."

This sentiment was shared not only among our left-wing last pioneers, but across the political spectrum. Stevan, a right-wing political member of parliament, originally from Vojvodina met me for another interview, another busy café in Belgrade, this time around the corner from the Temple of Saint Sava, the biggest Orthodox church in Serbia. A priest entered the café and greeted him warmly. Although Stevan belongs to one of the most right-wing political parties I interviewed in Serbia, he expressed clear respect for socialist Yugoslav times, especially regarding solidarity: "I am not an adherent of that ideology. I am not a fan of that communist ideology,… but on the issue of that sense of togetherness, it was paid much more attention to than today, in this system." And yet, Stevan's solidarity is different from Peter's or Mateja's: it remains directed primarily toward the ethno-nationality to which Stevan belongs, even if without any expressed animosity toward others.

Negative Memories and Emerging Cognitive Dissonances

Amid memories of normal life and solidarity, I waited for the other shoe to drop and for the last pioneers to start bringing their stories closer to hegemonic anti-Yugoslav discourses. Yet, tropes of socialist political repression, or their most common emblems like Goli Otok[10] or Bleiburg,[11] did not appear in their recollections of childhood or family life. Unless a personal example existed—as in Zvjezdana's case, where two relatives were part of the Ustasha diaspora in Germany—these narratives were rarely mentioned. When they did arise, it was only in relation to contemporary memory politics (see chapter 4).

Still, in order to avoid the impression that their memories were rose-tinted or *nostalgic*, right-wing and liberal last pioneers—and even some left-wing ones—felt compelled to underline their disagreement with the Yugoslav communist regime. Yet such statements were invariably followed by a "however." With that "however," a series of positive memories would emerge, or the interlocutor would stress that today the repression seems (almost) justified when viewed against the rapid progress Yugoslavia achieved in just a few decades and when contextualized within broader historical circumstances.

Along similar lines, there was no denial by the last pioneers that nationalist tendencies existed throughout Yugoslav history. Whenever these examples of communist repression were mentioned, they were followed by the explanation that such measures were directed primarily at cases of (ethno-national) hate speech, and were therefore justified. Antea sums up her analysis: "And all that repression, Goli Otok and everything else that is being talked about, it really seems banal to me, in comparison to what obviously needed to be achieved with such repression.... I now see what was boiling under the surface the whole time." Antea is not the only one to believe

10 Goli Otok is a prison island in Croatia which also held political prisoners in the period between 1948 and 1956, after the Tito–Stalin split. After 1956, the facility continued to function as a regular prison until 1989, when it was closed and abandoned. Estimates claim that between 400 and 600 prisoners died there. Just like Bleiburg, it became a symbol of communist repression in Yugoslavia.

11 Bleiburg is a small town in the southern Austrian state of Carinthia. In 1945, the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH), a Nazi satellite state, capitulated to the Yugoslav Partisan army. It was the site of numerous extrajudicial executions of Nazi collaborationist soldiers from the NDH, *Ustashe*, the Slovenian White Guard, and Serbian Chetniks. The exact numbers are still disputed. It became a site of *Ustasha* commemorations, especially popular since the 1990s, and a symbol of communist repression in Yugoslavia. These commemorations have since been banned by the Republic of Austria.

that repression was actually a necessary tool against the ethno-nationalisms which continuously endangered Yugoslavia.

Among the few interviewees genuinely dissatisfied with the darker chapters of socialist Yugoslav history stands Borna. True to his political positionality and his family's political socialization, he argued that Yugoslavia lacked strong connection between the state and religion: "Once you distance yourself from the church, from God,… there are no true values." The statement was striking, given the warmth that radiated from his childhood memories. To make sense of this detour, it is useful to recall that the meaning of each event in a life story is narrated and re-narrated with every retelling, continually reshaping mnemonic frameworks and illustrating how individuals remove "those aspects of themselves which seemingly 'contradict' the self-image they are currently trying to establish and sustain" (Misztal 2010b, 87). When positive memories, embedded in their generational positionality, dominated the conversation, if they were in contradiction with our pioneers' current political positionality, immediate discursive justifications were added—contributing to the broader strategy of singularity. Even the concept of normality could serve to mask ideological content: attributing the positive aspects of socialist Yugoslavia to mere normality allowed the last pioneers to distance their stories from the ideology of the past.

Whatever the first association of their childhoods may be, it is always linked to something perceived as missing today. We remember Franc, being excited for the interview and for that "beer with a Serb from Belgrade!". As he continued his childhood story, he struggled to reconcile his warm memories with his current ideological lenses: "But then we … then we were very, very.… It was very nice for us. OK, again, that is a little bit of nostalgia.… I was very sick. I had asthma.… So we bought a house on Cres,[12] because of the air.… But it was cheap then. You could get a house very cheaply.…" Taking long pauses, Franc dismissed his own positive memories by labeling them as Yugonostalgia, being utterly uneasy and eager to move on.

The binary framing of communist era memories as either nostalgic or traumatic oversimplifies complex histories and limits their place in global narratives. It functions not only as an undermining strategy applied to postcommunist citizens but also a discursive tool of liberal and right-wing political ideologies aimed at obscuring the positive legacies of communist societies and delegitimizing left-wing political options today. These strategies, so widely accepted through revisionist memory politics (see chapter 4), lead the last pioneers to distance themselves from their own positive memories,

12 Cres is an island in the northern Adriatic Sea in Croatia.

searching for ways out of cognitive dissonances. Yet across the political spectrum, they continue to appropriate memories of a functional state and a sense of national pride, both understood as elements of a *normal life*. On the right-wing end, positive associations include discipline, order, economic strength, and international standing.

For some, the Yugoslav past was unquestionably negative—or, more accurately, for one. Goran, a member of parliament from a libertarian political party, arrived at the café next to the parliament building in Belgrade visibly annoyed. Perhaps his parliamentary group had pressured him into the interview, or perhaps he was simply having a bad day. As we began talking, however, I realized that he might have been annoyed at the very topic of the discussion, unlike everyone else. Goran, once a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and now living in Belgrade, persistently rejected any positive value associated with the Yugoslav past, insisting that he had been a dissident from his early youth. He was adamant that children cannot understand politics: "Generally, when you are a kid, you would make your pledges to anyone: to Mussolini, to Vučić, to Saša Janković—I don't know—to Theresa May. I mean, there is no difference," reinforcing his claim that becoming a pioneer held no meaning for him, neither then nor now.

Are Those Memories Truly Ours?

Almost all our last pioneers were strikingly open and engaged during their participation in the research, continuously reflecting on the interview experience as it unfolded. For many—if not all—it was indeed the first time that they had been given such an opportunity, not only to share their life narratives, but also to connect the (hi)stories of their lives that lingered, disconnected. In these processes of negotiation, the last pioneers began to further question their stories, probing and challenging their memories.

Political socialization is a dynamic process that evolves throughout one's lifetime, while generational outlooks remain an important frame for these shifts (Inglehart 1977). As they rounded off the stories of their Yugoslav childhoods—deeply rooted in their families and in the political socialization that shaped their sense of a normal life—they began to wonder how the true heritage of that childhood had influenced who they became and who they are today.

As expected, generational positionality proved crucial in shaping how the last pioneers remembered their childhoods, leaving their narratives more positive than negative, and more Yugoslav than anything else. The left-wing

last pioneers add that it was precisely their socialist Yugoslav childhood that socialized them into becoming leftists. Yet they also questioned their own memories, aware of the violence that followed and of how both those events and their present political positionalities shaped their recollections. Throughout their life stories, they continued to reflect on their memories and identities, while (almost) always cheerfully embracing the identity of the last pioneers.

For many, despite their young age, becoming a pioneer represented a moment of being heard and of belonging to a community, a Yugoslav community. If we understand narratives as "selective accounts with beginnings and endings, constructed to create meanings, interpret reality, organize events in time, establish coherence and continuity, construct identities, enable social action, and to construct the world and its moral and social order for its audience" (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2011, 376), then the elements and values that form part the last pioneers' Yugoslav childhood narratives have been selectively chosen to interpret Yugoslav society. The positive categories do not necessarily contradict negative categories; rather, they reveal the capacity of political subjects to discern the complexities and ambiguities of social reality. The framing of certain events, an inevitable feature in memory narratives, shapes the social world of the last pioneers. A childhood marked by a single defining event will be narrated around that event; an economist today may emphasize the economic aspects of their childhood; the death of a parent may overshadow other memories. Yet across interviews in all three countries, the dominant sentiment was happiness. Even when filtered through present-day ideological lenses, many added that such happiness is common to all childhoods, not only Yugoslav ones: avoiding ideological claims through the language of normality.

Rarely discussed today, the identity ruptures experienced by the last pioneers at a young age underscored their growing distance from Yugoslav times and their difficulty in linking their Yugoslav childhoods, wartime adolescences, and "transitional" adulthoods. With the economic crisis and the dissolution of Yugoslavia beginning in 1990, the atmosphere changed. The last pioneers remembered the rise of nationalist and anti-Yugoslav pressures in their school environments, especially when their fathers served in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). These pressures were not remembered equally throughout the three countries, yet they do appear in both Slovenia and Croatia, being felt most strongly in the latter. Although these changes were noticeable to children and young adolescents, the general atmosphere did not suggest that war was imminent; according to the last pioneers, no one believed it would happen. Yet with the arrival of refugee children, the

sometimes astonishing imposition of new sub-dialects in schools, and direct discrimination based on ethno-nationality or a parent's profession, they began discovering their newly imposed identities—primarily in school settings. Looking back, they describe Yugoslavia as a dream from which they were brutally awakened.

In their memories, childhood remains a long sequence of happy and safe moments; a normal life that was viciously halted *just as they were supposed to have the most fun*. The last pioneers witnessed the end of their childhood, and the end of Yugoslavia overnight. The memory of this harsh rupture constitutes one of the key elements of their life narratives, one of the backbones of their cultural memory. After safety and happiness came a rupture that has marked (post)Yugoslav memory narratives ever since.

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3. The Rupture: Growing up Among the Ashes

Abstract: This chapter analyzes the violent rupture produced by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s as a formative generational experience. It traces how the last pioneers navigated sudden identity transformations, family fragmentation, displacement, and imposed mobilities. The chapter highlights processes of "unbecoming Yugoslav," demonstrating how ethno-national identities were enforced through violence, institutional change, and social pressure. By addressing both the trauma and normalization of war experiences, the chapter shows how rupture reconfigured political subjectivities without fully erasing Yugoslav generational belonging.

Keywords: Yugoslav wars; rupture; identity transformation; displacement; generation; war memories

I am convinced that there would not have been a war if they had only let my generation grow up.
—Zorana, refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, today living in Belgrade, born in 1975

The stark contrast between the remembered plenitude of Yugoslav childhoods and the harsh realities of the wars surfaced more than once: "from lobsters to starvation", as Una tells us. Nervous laughter often masked the unease of approaching more traumatic memories. Half-smiling, Una explained:

> A couple of times we were in a situation where we were hungry. And not only during the war, but also after the war.... I became aware of what it

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> meant to be hungry very young and what it meant under socialism to have food; to have, like, everything. For example, my mom, I remember that she experimented every Sunday [during the socialist times] with some [type of] fish [dish]. She even bought a lobster once. That is unbelievable!

For Una, her Yugoslav childhood smelled of safety and lobsters, even in a household with five kids, a stay-at-home mother, and a father working in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). After becoming refugees and losing everything, having survived part of the conflict in Sarajevo, hunger became a defining memory of her adolescence.

As the discussion turns to the wars and the dissolution of the country, the interviewees acknowledge with a certain melancholy that they became not only pioneers, but the last pioneers. Searching for early signs that the country was irretrievably falling apart, they mostly recall fear and confusion. Entering this terrain, they begin to reinterpret their childhoods. In narrating their coming-of-age stories and the rupture that followed, the word *overnight* appears in every account. With the wars, Yugoslavia became an unavoidable daily topic within families. As the sea breeze lends a strange lightness to the conversation, Mateja in Rijeka reflects on how it was in her family, especially as an ethnic minority: "Actually, you did not discuss Yugoslavia while you were living it.... You start to discuss Yugoslavia only once it did not exist anymore." In early childhood, families play a strong role in political socialization, and family memory narratives remain powerful tools of meaning-making for life (Figes 2008; Green 2013; Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998).

These narratives become more malleable in adolescence, when external influences begin to take precedence: beyond families and immediate environments such as school, we start trying to make sense of the wider world. Stories about childhood and adolescence reveal both how re-narration occurs and how it contributes to shaping identities (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). In *The Political Life of Children* (1986), Robert Coles argued that children and adolescents possess a full capacity to understand the political world around them, and with this in mind we continue to further discover the stories of the last pioneers.

As Yugoslavia was "withering away," and once the war began in 1991, the last pioneers were between nine and fifteen years old. Whether the conflict lasted "only" for ten days (like in Slovenia), or almost ten years (like in Serbia), the Yugoslav Wars marked the largest part of their adolescent years. Within those ten years, as the conflicts continued and the transitions entered a never-ending phase, the last pioneers lived through their most politically

"impressionable years" (Grasso 2016, 40). According to Grasso, adolescence is a time when our sense of self is questioned and consolidated, and when we begin to (re)construct political views by drawing on our surroundings while forming our own. As the last pioneers recount how they remember the major events that ruptured their lives, they narrate their identities: changing regimes, changing contexts, changing countries, changing homes. These narratives continue to illuminate their political identities, for "what an individual or a community chooses to tell about themselves is intricately tied to how they construct their political identities" (Andrews 2007, 11).

How do the last pioneers remember the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia? How do they recall the wars that ensued, causing identity discontinuities from such an early age? How do they relate to the (post)Yugoslav nation-building processes shaped by historical revisionism and anti-Yugoslav mainstream discourses?

After 1989, in the race to "return to Europe," two major "collective turnover events" (Jansen 2005, 12) were required: dismantling the communist regime and returning to or creating homogeneous nation-states. Although wartime experiences differed significantly across the (post)Yugoslav republics, the memories themselves are not ethno-national. An antinational "multitude of resistances" (Jansen 2005, 91) is remembered and remains alive across the (post)Yugoslav space. Borders change, open and close, yet they do not stop common identities, or memories, or shared cultures, or solidarity and unified struggles, thereby creating multidirectional memories (Rothberg 2010). As the journalist and public figure Viktor Ivančić famously remarked: "Who can be so stupid as to say that Yugoslavia is dead just because it does not exist anymore?" (Perica and Velikonja 2012, 239). How do, then, the last Yugoslav pioneers remember the end of a Yugoslavia that still exists?

Overnight

How did this rupture come into being? For our last pioneers, it happened *overnight*. In our conversations, certain phrases recurred: a radical cut; everything disappeared; everything fell apart; a sudden change; a turning point; the biggest rupture; the end of an era; we lost the ground under our feet. Three words surfaced again and again: sudden, loss, overnight. Confusion starts to enter the pioneers' life stories. Emphasizing that they still do not fully understand what happened, our last pioneers remember "simply waking up in a new country" or "one day you have one identity, all of a sudden the next day you have another."

Sitting in the café of the old Hotel Moscow in Belgrade, still charming with its live piano music, Katarina looks tired and apologizes for being somewhat slow that morning. She recounts her story of becoming a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, moving to Serbia, returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina for her studies, and then moving back to Serbia again. In describing this period, she reflects: "my childhood has a rupture … when from a bourgeois princess, I became a refugee."

As the unexpected arrived overnight, the last pioneers recalled that at the beginning of the conflict everyone thought it would be "temporary", that "it would pass quickly", and "soon everything would return to normal". Just as it was difficult elsewhere to imagine the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—events that brought to "a close the 'age of revolutions', but also two centuries dominated by belief in the idea of progress" (Rupnik 2014, 12)—in Yugoslavia it was equally unimaginable that the state could end, after half a century similarly shaped by faith in progress. Unlike the last Soviet generation, who simultaneously believed in the end of the Soviet system and in its eternal existence (Yurchak 2006), in Yugoslavia no one seemed to have expected the dissolution of the country, let alone the collapse of socialism and the wars that ensued. Vito, a left-wing party member from a right-wing conservative family in Croatia, continuously searches in his narrative for an understanding of the dissonances of his parents' narratives, without finding a definite answer:

> That's what my mother told me.… In the beginning of the 1980s, everybody thought that Yugoslavia and socialism would last forever. No one thought that it could fall apart. Simply, nobody thought about it. Just like today—nobody thinks that capitalism can fall apart. Back then, nobody thought how anything else could be possible.

Their once serene childhoods were overtaken by the traumas of adolescence. In the (post)Yugoslav space, trauma—a term used by the last pioneers themselves—did not mark the communist period, as it did in some other postcommunist contexts (Georgescu 2016). Trauma marked the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, the wars, and the impoverishment. In trying to make sense of the collapsing world around them, several last pioneers recalled keeping war journals, drawing on their childhood awareness of Anne Frank's diary; collecting newspaper clippings; and recording television news on VHS tapes in Osijek, Rijeka, and Ljubljana. The materiality of these rituals, preserved in personal archives, helped them create meaning out of their war years.

Tanja arrives at the café right on time, early in the morning in the central Serbian city of Kragujevac. Once a member of a right-wing party, she decided at one point that her activism would be more effective outside of the political party structure, as a trade-union member. Perfectly styled, slowly inhaling her slim cigarettes, Tanja exhales: "I remember … and those scenes are still alive in my mind … how much I got used to it,… that every evening on TV news I saw, I don't know, mutilated bodies, and, I don't know.… I remember bodies floating down the Sava and I am, like, [supposed to be] watching a cartoon."

A full exploration of war trauma exceeds the scope of this book, with substantial scholarship already devoted to the subject. While our focus is on "the transmission of positive forms of attachment" and on "an archive of mnemonic practices that extends beyond current practice and its traumatic horizons" (Rigney 2018b, 370), trauma nonetheless appears to be intertwined within nostalgic narratives, as their juxtaposition and their opposite. The trauma of dissolution became key marker of identity (dis)continuity, embedded within contemporary (post)Yugoslavism (see chapter 5). As Cathy Caruth explains that "the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream but in the experience of waking from it. It is the surprise of waking that repeats the unexpectedness of the trauma" (Caruth 2013, 6).

The surprise of waking from the Yugoslav dream of normal life marks the trauma as much as the war itself. For those who recounted traumatic episodes from the Yugoslav Wars, these experiences did not incite anti-Yugoslav sentiments; quite on the contrary. This dynamic of trauma operates not only individually but collectively (Craps 2010). Within the last pioneers' narratives, dissociation and screen memory start to set the stage, both concealing and revealing war memories. Often abruptly departing from their life narratives, they switch into *objective, analytical* modes of explaining the 1990s—subtly avoiding hegemonic discourses, while remaining within the simple duality of victims and perpetrators.

Interestingly enough, these analyses are accompanied by dissociation from the current political landscape despite their active participation in political life. Many express a sense of helplessness, positioning themselves as spectators, rather than political actors. Just as we anticipated delving deeper into memory narratives that spill into their political agency, an unexpected rejection of agency emerged. Whether due to a still-unrealized generational shift or a broader generational sense of helplessness, the last pioneers often did not perceive themselves as influential political actors despite their positions. Indeed, it was only after the fieldwork was concluded that many began to assume more prominent roles within their parties or

executive institutions—leaving open the question of whether this sense of helplessness has persisted.

Unbecoming Yugoslavs

In the memory narratives of our last pioneers, ethno-nationalism emerges as a relevant factor only moments before the dissolution and the wars. In Slovenia, the pejorative use of the term "Bosnians," denoting all non-Slovenian Yugoslavs, became prominent throughout the 1980s, marking memories of the wars' beginning. Ethno-national quarrels within the JNA are remembered by conscripts only in reference to the very late 1980s, mere moments before the wars erupted. As the dissolution loomed, our last pioneers began to discover that they were not (only) Yugoslavs, but Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, and so on. In a squatted cultural center in Ljubljana, as his daughter ran around and around, occasionally joining our conversation, Kenan explained: "I became Bosnian overnight. And you come to Slovenia, and you need a visa, and you need something.... To be honest, who stole my right [to be here]? We were born in the same country. My ancestors died in Krško,[1] fighting against Germans and fascists. So maybe it is not by accident that I found myself here."

As ethno-national differentiation was increasingly imposed across Yugoslavia, the last pioneers recall tensions and discrimination appearing as early as 1990. Lucija, left-wing NGO activist from Osijek in Slavonia, has long been engaged in civil society and her narrative flowed with the ease of a story told many times. Being a member of an ethnic minority, the war years were particularly painful for her. Sitting together on a boat café on the river Drava,[2] sipping a cold beer, she remembers: "In the second grade, we were distributed small pieces of paper on which we were ordered to write down the religion to which we belonged. I remember it precisely... [it was in] 1990." Lucija is not the only one to remember similar developments. Even if they were not yet taking place systematically, it seems that 1990 was the year when such occurrences began in some regions. Aleksa, first a refugee from Croatia in Bosnia and Herzegovina, then a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Serbia, where he still lives today, recalls: "In Zadar ... it started.... I don't know. The teacher asked us all to stand up, say our name and surname, our father's name, and where our father is from.... So, provocations,... but that was already 1989, 1990, when it happened."

1 Krško is a town in eastern Slovenia.

2 The Drava is the river which flows through Osijek.

In order to become Croats, Serbs, and Slovenians, the last pioneers first had to stop being Yugoslavs. For most of them, the earliest ethno-nationalist discourses appeared in schools. In their memories, the shift unfolded in similar ways. After the summer of 1990, they returned to classrooms where Tito's portraits had vanished or been replaced; school names had been altered; and, in some cases, the language or dialect of instruction had changed. The mother tongue became Croatian or Serbian in each respective republic, while in Slovenia the teaching of Serbo-Croatian was abolished altogether. In both Slovenia and Croatia, the Cyrillic alphabet disappeared from the curriculum.

Anka, an eloquent, sharp-minded left-wing activist from Croatia, and born in Dalmatia, engaged with the left-wing community across the (post) Yugoslav space, looks back on these sudden changes: "And then I remember they told us we can no longer say *zdravo*,[3] except if we want to say *zdravo budi Marijo* and that in Croatian you say *dobar dan*, and that *zdravo* is Serbian."

Some of our last pioneers remembered their teachers' warnings that they would become a lost generation, a generation without a future; warnings whose meaning they fully grasp only today. By 1991, the atmosphere was changing and their childhoods were to change abruptly. In the café of the Parliament in Zagreb, Miro—a left-wing member of parliament belonging to a national minority—lowers his voice slightly whenever he mentions Yugoslavia. As our conversation moves the pleasant memories of his childhood to the less pleasant memories of war, he recalls his school days in Šibenik:

> All of a sudden … [they said that] the school director will come to explain to us, the oldest pupils, what is going on. All of my professors, as much as I remember them, adhered to the party line, more or less,… so he explained that certain events are taking place with the aim of dividing the peoples, as a consequence of the bad governance of the party.… He explained that every Yugoslav republic had its own newspaper called *Communist*. *Communist* was a party newspaper.… He said that every republic published its own *Communist*, even the Yugoslav People's Army publishes its own,… and that this was the source of the problem.

With each republic producing its own *Communist*, it was not long before each began cultivating its own ethno-nationalism. When asked to remember the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars, the last pioneers

3 These are various greetings in the Serbo-Croatian language for hello/good day. *Zdravo budi Marijo* has a strong Catholic religious connotation, which explains why it was considered the only acceptable form in Croatia.

unsurprisingly associated the period with *difficulty* and *troubles*. While the teaching of history in schools was rapidly transforming, they were simultaneously trying to understand the world around them. They recall seeking answers from their families, leaving their homes as refugees, or watching others leave. Everything became unfamiliar—an unknown, total chaos.

Once the war began, the situation escalated further. Beyond ethno-national identity—often assigned rather than chosen—the pressure intensified at the ideological level as well. In Croatia, belonging to a former Partisan family, or in Slovenia having a father serving in the JNA, could be enough for children to face discrimination and, at the very least, unpleasant consequences. Klemen, the leader of a local political party in a small northern Slovenian town, grew up in a mixed marriage family. His father served as a JNA border guard at a small crossing with Austria. He recalls the confusion and severe consequences that followed the Ten-Day War.[4] Klemen describes when Slovenian forces arrived at the barracks: "They asked him [Klemen's father], 'Why didn't you surrender?' … [and he responded], 'Well, to whom would I surrender? Nobody came for me.'" And yet, his father was arrested for treason and ended up serving three months in prison. Such radical ruptures in life narratives strengthened emotional attachments to Yugoslav times and Yugoslav childhoods among all interviewees who experienced them. (Post)Yugoslav ethno-nationalisms were violent not only toward other groups, but also toward their own when individuals rejected newly imposed identities or failed to demonstrate loyalty.

Traumatic memories appeared more frequently among those from mixed marriages. Lucija continues her story:

> I remember [the war] well, because of my family situation…. It was very high risk…. They came twice for my dad and took him for an "informative talk."… These "informative talks" ended in the Drava, but he was lucky: he managed to get out of it. The first time they came, it was at his workplace. He did not want to leave [work], and he was not brutally taken away, so he stayed at work. The second time they came to our home, but he was not at home. The third time was, actually … we had this one raid at home, and I remember it vividly because I was there. I was in the toilet. In that moment when they arrived, I locked the door…. It was a big trauma [for me]. And it was literally a home raid, a real raid.

4 The conflict in Slovenia between the Slovenian Territorial Defense and the JNA lasted from June 27 to July 7, 1991, and is known as the Ten-Day War.

Many of the last pioneers experienced traumatic events during the wars and the dissolution. Yet, in our conversations, most avoided going into detail. Those who did were generally positioned on the left of the political spectrum. The interpretation of traumatic memories was closely tied to political positionality, fracturing what might otherwise appear as a unified generational positionality. Left-wing last pioneers approached their traumatic memories with greater openness to personal introspection, often identifying them as the roots of their antinationalist stance. By contrast, centrist and right-wing last pioneers framed such events as evidence for the impossibility of inter-ethnic coexistence in Yugoslavia. In both cases, political identities became the primary re-narrators of personal stories, shaping and framing specific memories.

In *Amoral Communities* (2019), Mila Dragojević identifies two fundamental elements that enabled violence in the Yugoslav Wars: the construction of borders and the removal of moderates. In Osijek, Josip Reihl-Kir—chief of police since 1990 and widely known for his efforts to de-escalate tensions and negotiate between—stands as a stark example. He was brutally murdered in 1991 by a declared pro-Ustasha with dual Australian-Croatian citizenship, and his killer was not convicted for his crime until 2008.[5] Across the republics, the events and the intensity of pressure and violence varied dramatically—from region to region, town to town, and sometimes even from building to building. Miro, now a prominent political figure in Croatia, was born in Šibenik in Dalmatia, and he recognizes how growing up there shaped his experience and later meaning-making:

> And what was good with Šibenik, as opposed to other towns [in Croatia], was that there was no removal of the citizens of Serbian ethno-nationality. It was also thanks to the then-police captain, who was very strict and he did not want to allow any [bad actions to happen].... Some lists were made.... We did not take it lightly, but nobody was coming for us, as opposed to [in other places].... I found out about it all later, when I started working in Zagreb and got in touch with people from all over Croatia. Then I realized that it was happening and that we were lucky that it wasn't like that at home.

Vito, sipping his beer in Zagreb, expressed similar sentiments: he did not personally experience traumatic ethno-national tensions, but only

5 See the documentary movie by Ivan Ramljak, *Mirotvorac* [Peacemaker] (2025).

later in life learned the extent to which such events were unfolding around him:

> I did not experience any problems. But there was [trouble] … because I know some stories, from my cousins.… A friend had a Serbian husband, from a Serbian family but from Zagreb. He was fired, for example, and he left for Serbia. And then my cousin held a grudge against him because he went to Serbia during the war. That cousin is a right-winger and he told us honestly years later, "Listen, he was a bigger *Zagrepčanin* than me.[6] He spoke only in the Zagreb dialect.[7] He was fired just because he was a Serb." Well, wait, how can you judge him for leaving for Serbia, when he was fired without any reason?

Memories begin to intersect with later reconstructions of events, and with reinterpretations shaped by the last pioneers' present, adult perspectives. Had Josip Reihl-Kir not been assassinated, perhaps the situation in Osijek would have resembled that of Šibenik more closely. Today, Osijek is a city hollowed out by transitional impoverishment and by the emigration that accelerated after Croatia's accession to the EU. Upon arriving in Osijek, I encountered the war memorial (see figure 3.1)—a monument none of the last pioneers I interviewed ever mentioned or recognized as a lieux de mémoire. As Robert Musil observed, nothing is as invisible as a monument, and yet it remains deeply imprinted in the city's narratives.

As hegemonic ethno-nationalist discursive regimes started re-writing Yugoslav history, the enemy was no longer only "the Other" in ethno-national or religious terms; it became anyone who opposed the incitement or perpetuation of violence. Not only did Una stop eating lobster; she found herself and her family on the frontline in Sarajevo, in a building literally on the dividing line. Her father remained on the *other* side. She, along with her numerous siblings and her mother, lived through months of both harassment and neighborly solidarity before they managed to run over to the other side and reunite with her father. Her otherwise cheerful mood significantly changes once we begin talking about the start of the war. Una explains her fear, as she remembers it: "And so, now we were Serbs; and there were mostly Serbian children that stayed, whom we hung out with, but there were Muslims, too. And some Serbs were harassing them.… There were Chetniks with skulls, so they moved around and patrolled the Serbian Sarajevo. And that was a horrible situation.… I was, for example, more afraid of them than [of the soldiers on the enemy side]."

6 A citizen of Zagreb.

7 "*Kajkao je*": *kajkavski* is the dialect used in the city of Zagreb.



Figure 3.1. The text accompanying the monument reads: "Osijek June 27, 1991–June 27, 2011. On June 27, 1991, the tank of the great Serbian aggressor crashed into the red Zastava 750 that was placed defiantly in front of it at this intersection by our fellow citizen Branko Breškić. In memory of the resistance, defiance, and victory in the imposed war, this art installation has been erected by the citizens of the unconquered town of Osijek," author's archive, 2017.

At the same time, their teenage lives seemed to continue as usual: many remember concerts, parties, and first loves, especially in Serbia or in regions not directly affected by the conflicts, such as Istria in Croatia. Yet everywhere they also remember fear—fear for themselves, for their loved ones, and the pervasive atmosphere of war. From memories of diversity, the last pioneers suddenly began narrating memories of quarrels, disruptions, and divisions.

The Dissolution of Yugoslav Families

Tensions began to appear even among school friends. Borna, our right-wing interviewee from the Dalmatian coast, being already fifteen at the time, recalls an argument between friends:

> …So there was a dispute, with all those boyish arguments…. I heard on the television, or in my family, that Yugoslavia was an artificial creation…. My friend responded to me that marriage is also an artificial creation … and

> so we argued about it.... We were aware that it was a heated discussion, fierce, and that we were actually fighting.... So, as friends who grew up together, we were at one point fighting. In the end, it was an absurd situation.

For Borna, who maintains these childhood friendships to this day, falling out with his friends remains a vivid memory of a once-peaceful childhood.

Soon enough, violence also disrupted families—the very diverse families of which our last pioneers had been so proud. As might be expected, in intermarriages it was more often the women who followed their spouses, sometimes at the cost of being disowned by their own families or local communities. Aleksa recalls what happened when his mother followed his father to Serbia: "They started calling her *četnikuša*."[8]

Once the wars started, decisions to leave were frequently triggered by direct ethno-national violence and threats, unfriendly visits by unknown soldiers, insulting graffiti in building corridors, or written signs on family names on intercoms. According to the last pioneers, socialist Yugoslavia had largely overcome the tensions and animosities inherited from the Second World War. The dissolution of Yugoslavia, however, reopened these wounds. Families suddenly found themselves divided—sometimes literally on opposite sides of the frontline. Zorana, who often said her family would never have been so mixed without Yugoslavia, recalls how this diversity unfolded once the war began: "We had total madness, my father and his nephew—the son of my father's sister—were both on the frontline, but on opposite sides." Similar memories are shared by Vito in Zagreb: "I have some cousins.... Their dad was a Serb, and [their] mom a Croat. He, for example, was in the Croatian army, and his brother on the other side. There were some stories like that. There was a lot of ideological confusion....."

Fear and uncertainty spread quickly during the war, loosening the Yugoslav ties that had once held communities together. Many last pioneers witnessed this unraveling firsthand, or they absorbed stories that circulated throughout the 1990s. In Croatia, Antea recalls: "We had at home some people from Mostar [who were] architects.... The man was telling us that his students shot at him, not by accident, but aiming at him as their professor ... and then he asked the rhetorical question: "Was I such a bad professor?" She continues:

8 *Četnik* (primarily a reference to the monarchist forces in the Second World War, who became collaborators with the Nazi regime) became a derogatory term for all Serbs; thus the derogatory female form *četnikuša*.

> Then, we had a friend who was a Serb and who is now living in Belgrade,... who even, as a minor, helped the Croatian army in Dubrovnik.... Anyway, his house was burned down, as a Serbian [house], and his parents were driven away. He was at the time already at my place in Zagreb and I remember when he got the news that he did not have a home in Dubrovnik anymore ... he went silent. He didn't speak for a year. Basically, his friends burned his house down.

Recalling the stories she heard from the refugees her family hosted in Zagreb, Antea further explains the fear the war generated. As with Una in East Sarajevo, her fear was not directed toward people of other ethno-nationalities, but toward those who were warmongering and participating in violence:

> But I remember, when after *Oluja*,[9] there was an army procession of Croat soldiers in the city. I will never forget it. I was on my street, in the center of Zagreb, and I felt extremely unpleasant and I remember that I turned my back to the wall because I was afraid of them. I did not experience it as a celebration and a victory, but then, in 1995, I was afraid of them. That fear remained for a long time, because people walked around in uniforms for a truly long time.

As relations between the political elites of the Yugoslav republics deteriorated and fueled violence, even within non-mixed families, political disagreements began to surface. With characteristic humor and loud laughter, Anka recounts a story from her politically mixed household:

> I remember that Grandma found it outrageous that Grandpa was voting for Račan,[10] and against Croatia leaving Yugoslavia. And I remember that Grandpa was very aggressive about his viewpoints. I didn't understand anything,... just that they shouted and fought. I remember the topic of the argument, why it was important, and I remember that I thought that Grandpa was a Chetnik [laughter].... And I remember that once I came home from school,... actually I remember that morning, before I went to school, Grandma took down Tito's portrait that was above the television and put Tuđman's there instead.[11] When I came home ... everything was

9 Operation Storm, the last major battle conducted by the Croatian Army in 1995.

10 Ivica Račan, the candidate of the post-communist Social Democratic Party of Croatia.

11 Franjo Tuđman was president of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) from 1989 to 1999 and president of the Republic of Croatia from 1990 to his death in 1999; in nationalist discourses, he is presented as the father of independent Croatia.

> smashed. It was clear that Grandma and Grandpa had a fight.... And then, later, I found out it happened because of that portrait, because Grandpa had a nervous breakdown when he saw Tuđman hanging in his home, and plates started flying around. He threw a plate at Tuđman, then she threw everything off the dining table ... and they had a horrible fight because of damn Tuđman. Then they found a compromise: Tuđman's portrait was never again put up on the walls; Tito's portrait went back where it was; and then next to him was the Pope [laughter] ... but when Grandpa died, unfortunately before Tuđman in 1997, then Tito was thrown out of the house and only the Pope stayed.

Following Chip Gagnon's thesis (2004) that nationalism was instigated from the top down, rather than the bottom up, the memories of our last pioneers align closely with this view. In Osijek, they consistently emphasized that the war came first, and nationalism merely followed. Lucija, an ethnic minority making sense of her traumatic wartime memories, stands firm on the sequence of events:

> for me, personally, the times when that situation [war] had officially ended were much more brutal ... because then everything became normal.... My family, friends, neighbors, everyone around me.... You see that people start behaving differently, that they had started to accept or tolerate something that you know they [previously] wouldn't, and that it had all become normal.

The normal life of the Yugoslav period was replaced by a new, unsettling normality.

Yugoslav families previously described as "mixed"—in multiple senses—made clear ethno-national identification impossible. For a war allegedly premised on ethno-national belonging, this identity confusion generated additional fear. Regardless of institutional debates about the national question within the Party or the absence of an institutionalized Yugoslavism in socialist Yugoslavia, everyday life had produced complex identities that were rarely reducible to (one) religion or ethno-nationality alone. Countries can be dissolved through declarations, treaties, and international recognition, but "imagined communities" do not disappear overnight. The "imagined" Yugoslav identity was no less "imagined" than any other ethno-national identity in Yugoslavia; or elsewhere. Una sums it up well: "In the war, people became a certain ethno-nationality sometimes even by chance.... I could not accept it; on one side, you feel the horror [of

it all] because those who are shooting at us are suddenly Muslims and Croats, and I am suddenly a Serb. Although I know that I am not really a Serb, but…."

Meandering Across Political Identities

Once everything changed overnight, the last pioneers entered their adolescent phase of political socialization. These years were marked by wandering, straying, and shifting political views. Their childhoods had been shaped by the socialist Yugoslav worldview, but wartime introduced a different ideological framework—anticommunist and nationalist—following by the neoliberal economies of the postwar "transitions." Given the prominence of nationalist discourses in the buildup to and during the war, many of our last pioneers, being adolescents, experienced a phase of nationalist or religious awakening. For the right-wing last pioneers, this nationalist orientation endured; for others, antinationalism eventually prevailed.

In Croatia, the introduction of religious education in the mainstream school system generated peer pressure and incited some to undergo Catholic instruction, even though many now identify as atheists. Between bites of the Bajadera Filip brought to sweeten our interview,[12] he clarifies: "It was 1992 [and] everybody started going to church…. So they asked me if I wanted to go to church…. I had no clue what I would do there, I said, but [my feeling was], "Let's go." … Marko goes, Pero goes, so will I go…. So, when I was thirteen, fourteen years old, I did it all, all those sacraments. And I am ashamed of it still today," he adds, being a fervent far-left antifascist activist in a social movement in Croatia. Another Zagreb-based left-wing party member, Vito, offers a similar account:

> I am now an atheist, of course. I never really believed, it was more something social. There wasn't even pressure, but two or three people from my group of friends went, so we asked ourselves, "Why are they going and why don't we?" Something my mother told me only a few years ago was that the school director once said in a meeting: "The only ones who don't go to religious education are Serbs and [surname of the interviewee]" (like, me and my brother). I didn't feel [pressure to go] at all, [but] obviously there was pressure. My parents never said anything [to me]…. So, when we started attending religious education, it was like

12 Bajadera is a popular sweet produced by Kraš, today in Croatia, considered a sweet for special occasions across Yugoslavia.

> … they play football, so we want to. But now you can see [something different].… For example, my little cousin was horrified when I told her I don't believe in God.

"Fitting in" was not limited to the new religious education classes. In the heart of Belgrade, sipping her second Turkish coffee of the morning, Zorana laughs while recalling her own early attempts to locate her political positionality. She remembers bringing home a cassette tape of Serbian nationalist songs about the Kosovo battle "because it was popular then and not because I knew what it really was. Dad got really mad, and then Dad and Mom got into a fight over it [laughter]." Without truly understanding the new realities, the last pioneers nonetheless sensed that the old world was gone.

Imposed Mobilities

Becoming a refugee—or knowing one, or many—stands as one of the central leitmotifs in the last pioneers' memories of the 1990s. For those who became refugees themselves, memories are often the only trace of the past that remains: their houses were burned, and with them everything they owned. Many were displaced multiple times—moving from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, then from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, or through any other number of combinations across the (post)Yugoslav space. Everything changed: their homes, their surroundings, their schools. Beyond hunger and the trauma of running across the firing line in Sarajevo to reach her father on *the other side*, Una—always speaking loudly, vividly, and with a deep desire to understand her life history and political identity—recalls: "You come into a new school.… It's like the same language, but, you know, many things are different, many things. For example, [there was] a totally different curriculum in mathematics." From the calm and order of their Yugoslav childhoods, the dissolution of Yugoslavia marked the start of turmoil and never-ending change.

For all of our last pioneers, the disappearance of important people from their lives remains one of the strongest wartime memories, colored by feelings of loss and abandonment. *Overnight*, they lost classmates, best friends, and first crushes. As previously noted, they had grown up socializing with other children on playgrounds, in front of their buildings, and in schools. Biting into yet another Bajadera and still damp from the summer rain that caught us on our way to the café in central Zagreb, Filip continues his bittersweet narrative, shaking his head:

> …one day you have five friends with whom you hang out every day, you go home from school with them every day, and then one day you come to school and they are gone…. What the hell? One minute they were here, the next minute they were gone…. So, obviously, if you are the one who left, you are bad…. We who stayed—we are good.

Yet those who stayed were the ones who experienced the war most directly. Lighting one cigarette after another in worn-down armchairs in a left-wing social space in Belgrade, Sonja nervously recounts her adolescence during the war in Bosnia. She arrived in Belgrade only after the war, in the early 2000s. Tapping ash from her cigarette, she looks down and admits that she rarely talks about these experiences: "I repressed those things…. The only thing I remember, actually, is that I was always crying because someone was leaving the building … and that it was really difficult…. Friends from school, someone was always leaving … and they were leaving within a very short time frame…"

Nostalgia for one's childhood home comes through more strongly in the stories of those last pioneers who became refugees. There is nothing specifically Yugoslav—or socialist—about this: exile heightens the sense of loss and transforms home into an imagined, immutable place of longing. What is particular in this context is that such ordinary nostalgia came to be treated as a peculiar post-socialist anomaly, or, in the case of Yugonostalgia, even as a forbidden emotion.

Fabijan invited me to his apartment in Novi Zagreb, where he lives with his parents. It became the longest interview I conducted, with coffee, juice, cookies, and the warmth of a home. A member of a left-wing party, active especially in local municipal politics, Fabijan described his everyday acts of resistance, often directed at those closest to him, as he defended the legitimacy of his attachment to what was once home:

> I had a discussion about it, about my nostalgia toward Novi Sad,… where my aunt told me that she was upset by the fact that I am so nostalgic toward Novi Sad and Vojvodina. So, I told her,… "OK, tell me, do you go every year to Dalmatia?" [She said], "I go." "Do you go to see your family and friends there?" "I do." … "Why? Why wouldn't you go to Barcelona? Or Berlin? Why is your nostalgia toward your own birthplace more politically correct than mine? Because my homeland is in Serbia? Can you please remember the simple fact that I cannot change my birthplace?" I could, but then it would mean that I am running away from something.

For some, the dissolution of the country not only meant the loss of a homeland but also the loss of a home. As people became refugees and lost everything, their housing situations often left them effectively homeless. In Croatia, the last pioneers recall the expulsions of all those deemed unwelcome—that is, non-Croat populations. Antonio, a political party member from Split, explained that even today everyone knows exactly who expelled whom from which flat in the city. Fabijan experienced the institution of *flat exchange* firsthand.[13] His family moved from Novi Sad to Zagreb in 1991 through a flat exchange, imagining the move would be temporary, "until things cool down." As Croats in Novi Sad, they endured discrimination and what he calls "small provocations": their surname marked on their apartment doors, his mother harassed at work. After arriving in Zagreb, they faced yet another struggle—to hold on their new apartment amid ongoing expulsions carried out by unknown, or sometimes very well-known, perpetrators.

Just as they were leaving somewhere, the refugees were also arriving somewhere. These forced migrations reshaped population structures across Yugoslavia. Luka offers one example: the town of Inđija in Vojvodina, with 22,000 inhabitants, received 16,000 refugees, nearly doubling its population. Such demographic shifts inevitably produced tensions, which were also felt among children and adolescents, as Luka remembers. Rather than ethno-national tensions, the primary frictions in this town were actually intra-ethno-national, between "natives" and "newcomers." The last pioneers remember responses ranging from pity to antipathy toward incoming classmates: in Slovenia, animosity toward other Yugoslavs intensified; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they remember laughing at refugee children's different dialects and accents. Those who were refugees themselves, remember struggling to fit in and adapt to unfamiliar environments.

Yet alongside feelings of betrayal and intimate ruptures, families also shared hopeful stories: stories of friends and neighbors protecting each others' homes, defending them from ethno-nationalist violence. Family backgrounds did not prevent friendships; one interviewee in Slovenia had friends whose fathers served in the Territorial Defense of Slovenia, while his own father remained in the Yugoslav People's Army.

13 When the conflicts started, a number of citizens "exchanged" flats in different republics, as in the example given here. Those who managed to exchange their flats were considered the lucky ones, since they had secured housing in the republics to which they fled. Obtaining legal documents also facilitated avoiding expulsions and evictions from new apartments.

"It Was Not That Bad"

Against interpretations that frame the (post)Yugoslav space as composed of mutually hostile communities, the value of solidarity stands firm, appearing across all narratives. One recurring example emerges in every interview, across all three countries, political orientations, and personal circumstances: the tendency to downplay the seriousness of one's traumatic wartime experiences. While this can be understood as a common response to trauma, it was consistently linked to an awareness that, given the scale of atrocities committed during the Yugoslav Wars, their own suffering felt comparatively minor. Sometimes these comparisons were made in solidarity with contemporary refugee experiences. Lucija from Osijek, who was internally displaced in Croatia, explained: "When I was in the war, as a refugee, we were treated like we were on summer vacation. That is not how it goes today.... When I attend protests and I see [refugees living] in the parks,[14] ... that's not how it goes today, not even close." The linking of personal memories of violence and displacement to present-day crises—through solidarity and compassion—offers yet another example of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) at work across spaces and epochs.

These multidirectional frames persist throughout the Yugoslav Wars and across the (post)Yugoslav space. Humor frequently enters the narrative; and the phrase most often used by our last pioneers when discussing the wars is "we got away just fine." Zala, once actively involved in a centrist political party before leaving disillusioned, was shy about her relevance as a political actor. As she sipped coffee in central Ljubljana, we turned to her adolescence during the war. She recounted an anecdote illustrating Slovenia's limited direct war experience: a visiting American professor once asked her class to write an essay on the Ten-Day War. She tells me: "We all reacted surprised: What war? There was no war here [laughter].... In the south, that's where the war is happened." Yet Slovenia was not untouched. The diversity of Yugoslav families and cross-border ties meant that the "distant" war left traces there as well. Violence was omnipresent. Igor, a member of parliament for a center-left party in Ljubljana, invited

14 Many refugees from the Middle East took the so-called Balkan route after 2015, which saw a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. This led to the European Union controlling the borders and often leaving these people—mostly young men but also entire families—in seriously violent and unregulated conditions across the Balkans. Many of them used to sleep in city parks, with no protection of any kind. An unknown number of people died, and continues to die, on this route.

me to his parliamentary office and spoke in fluent Serbo-Croatian as he explained:

> For example, on my father's side, they are from Kladuša. It was not only Serbs and Muslims at war; Muslims fought among themselves, too. There was Abdić[15] and Izetbegović,[16] so the situation was very bad.... I know that, for example, my father has two brothers, and neither of them was in the war, I mean [none of them was in the war] as a soldier, because they lived here [in Slovenia], but my cousin was [in the war] ... I don't know for how long, he is two years younger than me.... He stayed during the whole war with his grandmother, meaning my grandmother. He lived down there [in Bosnia], actually, next to the border between Izetbegović and Abdić.

In reality, nobody "got away just fine." The last pioneers' narratives are filled with references to electricity outages; family members involved in wartime violence; going to school under sniper fire; police repression in minority regions; friends killed; and their own brushes with death. But as long as neither they nor their closest family members were directly harmed, they considered themselves "fine," fully aware that the absence of direct personal violence shaped their memories. As Antea put it: "I mean, if some of my close ones were slaughtered, I would probably think differently, and I suppose that I would think differently about Yugoslavia." We remember Una running across the frontline with her family to join her father in Sarajevo, where she was already a refugee from Croatia, only to become a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Serbia. Even she insists that she did not feel the war violence as intensely as others: "So I didn't really feel it.... I mean, I did, a million times, when there were really heavy attacks, when we had to hide, when somebody from our close environment died. Luckily, no one from my family died. We are all alive and so.... But it is all simply horrible, it was horrible.... Hunger was, I think, the most difficult thing."

These recollections are only glimpses of the memories shared by our last pioneers in 2017 and 2018. Memories shift over time—and shift again each

15 Fikret Abdić is a Bosnian politician and businessman, also known as Babo, who during the war proclaimed the short-lived Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia against the then-Bosnian government and allied with the Army of Republika Srpska. He was convicted for war crimes in the Republic of Croatia, but he continues to be active in politics.

16 Alija Izetbegović was an Islamic philosopher and author. He was the founder and first president of the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, which led the Bosniak army during the war, allied with the Croatian army forces, until conflict also erupted between these two groups.

time they are narrated. Changing memories generate new narratives; new narratives shape identities; identities, in turn, influence political positionalities and vice versa. The temporal dimension is therefore manifold: we must attend to the precise moment of narration, to the narrator's stage of life, and to the broader global context. Memory narratives are deeply embedded in generational positionalities, and the life stories we recount are continually shaped by both political and generational positionalities.

Despite their political engagement today, the last pioneers consistently emphasize that, being kids at the time, they had no role in the Yugoslav Wars. For their parents' generation, memories carry a different weight—what Catherine Baker calls "memories of moral compromise," such as "participating in the black market or compromising the cherished myth of multi-ethnic Sarajevo by giving in and viewing ethnic groups as the basic building-blocks of society" (2015, 67). Perceiving their parents as a generation that lived a "normal" (socialist) life yet was responsible for many wartime wrongdoings, the last pioneers maintain a strong sense of distance. Their lack of agency during the wars contributes to their uncertainty about the dissolution and its violence. They do not identify as perpetrators, victims, or even implicated subjects (Rothberg 2019).[17] Even as political actors today—participating in regimes that inevitably reproduce positions of victims and perpetrators—their narratives remain dominated by a sense of helplessness, which reinforces this distance and diminishes any feeling of responsibility. They have developed a cautious approach to the past, marked by openness to uncertainty and acceptance of ambiguity. Some were already aware of propaganda during the wars, not just in retrospect. Ivo, who recorded television reports during his adolescence in Ljubljana, showed a deeper interest for the events of the 1990s and the dissolution process, attesting to a higher political interest than that of his peers. He recalls:

> in 1993, we went to Dalmatia, and we took with us lots of food, flour, drinks, etc., because there was no electricity on the island, and we were carrying it on the ferry for my family… And I was there, and I see, Croatian TV starts saying that forty grenades just fell on Biograd an hour ago and that there was a bomb that fell on the bus station…. How? We were there…. Nothing was falling.

17 Rothberg's concept of implicated subject is defined as "positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (Rothberg 2019, 1).

Taking a long pause after this reflection, he becomes even more agitated with today's nationalist discourses.

In juxtaposing their personal memory narratives with mainstream discourses, the last pioneers transform their life stories into counter-narratives. These are not expressions of nostalgia but rather demands for the recognition of a history—one that acknowledges complexity and multiperspectivity. The production of such counter-narratives is rooted in generational positioning, a concept developed by Monika Palmberger to describe the "importance to the stage of life in the sense of a particular 'life situation' individuals are in at the time when they reflect on the past (and not only at the time of the original experience)" (2016, 9). Through their present-day positions as political actors, the last pioneers' Yugoslav memories shift meaning "with major social shifts that affect entire mnemonics" (Misztal 2010b, 87). In the current (post)Yugoslav political climate—revisionist, anticommunist, and anti-Yugoslav—their life stories cease to be merely autobiographical and become political, contentious narratives. It is in the encounter between these narratives and their political identities that they are read as nostalgic sentiments or evolve into more articulated political demands.

Once the last pioneers enter the part of their life narratives that concerns the end of socialist Yugoslavia and the wars—the period in which their political socialization was most intense—greater uncertainty emerges. Distancing themselves from violent events helps them re-establish continuity, yet minimizing the impact of trauma places them once again in an ambiguous position toward the Yugoslav past. For many, the wars appeared to erupt abruptly, demanding the dismantling of their Yugoslav identity just as their previously safe families and circles of friends began to fall apart; often they themselves had to relocate and become refugees. These ruptures prompted early explorations of political positionalities, frequently involving brief (and sometimes longer) moments of alignment with ethno-nationalist positions. Their subsequent political trajectories, however, reshaped how they perceive hegemonic ethno-nationalist discourses and revisionist histories, introducing new cognitive dissonances that their narratives must work to resolve.

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4. Becoming Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes: Revisionisms, Individual and Collective

Abstract: Chapter 4 examines postwar processes of nationalization and historical revisionism in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, focusing on how individuals reinterpret Yugoslavia and the wars within dominant national narratives. It analyzes divergences and asymmetries in memory regimes, as well as convergences and divergences between ethno-national hegemonic narratives in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. The chapter demonstrates how alignment with anti-Yugoslavism occurs unevenly and often strategically, revealing tensions between personal memories and hegemonic interpretations of the past.

Keywords: historical revisionism; postwar narratives; Slovenia; Croatia; Serbia; memory regimes

The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world. The history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history, is living history, that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective specious present, the specious present of Mr. Everyman.

—Carl Becker (2011, 125)

One enduring question remains: do history books and official historical discourses truly leave an impact on individuals and their narratives? Some work is certainly done by (un)read books, but the more significant work lies in the ongoing negotiation between what is told and what is remembered. Since the 1980s, hegemonic discourses produced by political elites of a different generation, official histories in textbooks, and the interventions of activist historians have proliferated across the (post)Yugoslav space.

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Memories are in continuous narration and creation, re-narration and re-creation, making it impossible to draw a clear line between individual and collective memory. Collective memories—just as individual ones—remain plural and shift according to the needs of the hegemonic discourses. While methodological nationalism tends to claim the existence of one coherent ethno-national collective narrative, the reality tends to be more nuanced. The positionality of the mnemonic actors influences the layeredness of the narratives. Even when accepting the premise of a somewhat coherent hegemonic memory politics from specific political regimes in power, their politics remain adaptable to ever-shifting historical and social trajectories. One way to understand this adaptability is exactly through studying the memory narratives of the political actors we see as key creators of hegemonic memory politics of certain times. Uncovering the memories of political actors from the generation of the last pioneers helps us capture this dynamic phenomenon of (post)Yugoslav memory politics, or at least one element of it. Referring to collective memory as social memory, Burke claims that "we need to identify the principles of selection and to note how they vary from place to place or from one group to another and how they change over time. Memories are malleable, and we need to understand how they are shaped and by whom" (Burke 2011, 189).

Despite the low ethno-national distance among populations (Baker 2015; Gordy 1999) that I outlined earlier, the crises that unfolded in Yugoslavia during the 1980s steadily eroded sociability across all layers of Yugoslav society, both in class and ethno-national terms (Archer 2018). In 1985, Veselin Đuretić's monograph *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama* (The Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama) marked a turning point: it was the first work "to abandon the antifascist consensus in the interpretation of the history of World War II in Yugoslavia, while adopting nationalism as the key point of reference in the interpretation of the war" (Škorić and Bešlin 2017, 638).[1]

Rewriting Yugoslav history required a systematic effort to re-nationalize the Yugoslav space. In order to de-Yugoslavize (post)Yugoslav peoples and reinforce ethno-national identities, new shared historical memories had to be created, differentiating elements amplified, and Yugoslav solidarity dismantled. After the wars, mainstream discourses further worked to justify the atrocities and to consolidate the state-building projects of the separate

1 For more on the development of ethno-nationalism in socialist Yugoslavia in the 1980s, see the introduction to this volume, as well as Bieber, Galijaš, and Archer, eds. 2014; Hajzler 2024; Popović 2024; Zajc 2015.

(post)Yugoslav republics. "Professional historians," as historians who take an active role in promoting specific memory agendas, especially those imparting hegemonic discourses (Berger and Conrad 2015), took up their role of rewriting (post)Yugoslav histories, helping to advance ethno-nationalist agendas. At once, the Yugoslav imagined community (Anderson 2016) had to transform into (at least) seven ethno-national imagined communities through imposed discourses, that determined what would be remembered and what would be forgotten.

For decades, any positive reflection on socialist regimes has been labeled nostalgic. In the same way, any positive reflection on Yugoslavia is readily categorized as Yugonostalgic. Dissonances between public memory discourses and intimate family narratives were already identified by Tschuggnall and Welzer in their study of the intergenerational transmission of the Nazi past in Germany (2002). Similar dissonances appear throughout the narratives in this research. Drawing on Bartlett (1932), these tensions were resolved through various discursive strategies designed to conform to the "social conventions and beliefs current in the group to which the individual subject belonged" (118). The more our conversations moved toward what is understood as "general history," the more the last pioneers interpreted and reinterpreted their narratives through their political positionality. Conversely, the deeper we entered their intimate life stories, the more strongly they aligned with their generational positionality.

Anthony D. Smith argues that nations require "the constant renewal and re-telling of our tale by each generation of our descendents" (2011, 236). In line with this expectation, political actors in the now seven (post)Yugoslav nation-states are compelled to retell the story of "their own" nations, despite having been socialized into a markedly different—Yugoslav—political framework. Among the interviewed last pioneers, those positioned on the right and center-liberal spectrum were more inclined to internalize historical-revisionist mainstream discourses and to embrace nation-building narratives aligned with anticommunist and anti-Yugoslav stances. Left-wing last pioneers, by contrast, more frequently resisted these narratives and (re)produced counter-narratives. Yet the dividing line between political positionalities was not always clear-cut, remaining dependent on personal histories and individual memories. Moreover, none of our last pioneers perceived themselves as producers of mainstream discourses, overlooking their own role as political actors. In their view, political elites remain the previous generations—even as a generational shift is taking place as we speak.

The 1990s

In the last pioneers' narratives, the 1990s take an important role. The decade unfolded very differently across the countries examined. Slovenia experienced the Ten-Day War in the summer of 1991; in Croatia the war began in 1991, with the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) operations ending in 1992, followed by a period of frozen conflict until the Croatian army's final operations in 1995 and the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia in 1998; while in Serbia, the conflicts stretched from 1991 until the end of the NATO bombing in 1999. These divergent political circumstances shaped the last pioneers' memories in distinct ways. Still, in Croatia and Serbia especially, "the 1990s" emerged as a salient temporal marker in their narratives, though framed differently. If happiness, progress, and brotherhood and unity characterized their Yugoslav childhoods, the associations tied to the 1990s were their stark opposites.

Among the last pioneers in Slovenia, references to the Ten-Day War appear only occasionally and primarily in relation to the independence of the Republic of Slovenia; the 1990s do not hold a distinct mnemonic status in their life stories. When the decade does surface, it is almost always because of continued ties with the wider (post)Yugoslav space—family connections or other intimate relationships. Such ties deepen Yugoslav sentiment, as it reinforces shared generational experiences.

In his parliamentary office in Ljubljana, Andrej described his more personal connection with the (post)Yugoslav conflicts in the 1990s. His girlfriend at the time lived in Serbia, which made 1999 particularly memorable:[2] "We still had a lot of friends around.... We were true Yugoslavs, you know, in that sense. And from our side, from Aviano, these planes [were taking off],... you know, toward my girlfriend." Even if borders were constructed, they did not (always) tear down Yugoslav families, friendships, and relationships.

For the interviewees in Slovenia—especially those with relatives elsewhere in Yugoslavia—memories of "the war" typically referred to conflicts in other republics: "War in Slovenia ... I would say I don't have any memories of it ... I remember a gray airplane that flew over Štore ...[3] on television we saw those couple of tanks and that is my memory, to be honest ... it is stupid, it's one week, in comparison to five years ... But anyhow, when you

2 From March 24 to June 10, 1999, NATO forces bombed the Republic of Serbia, then part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

3 Štore is a town in Slovenia.

compare it, I have stronger memories of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina than that," Ivan explained in Ljubljana. For those with little or no personal connection, the wars elsewhere in Yugoslavia felt distant—especially the war in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Serbia. In the cellar of a Ljubljana restaurant, still decorated with pictures of Tito, Marko, a member of a local social movement turned political party in Nova Gorica, described the Kosovo conflict as follows: "it was like Rwanda for us … far, far away." Despite this distance, connections across the region were quickly (re)built in the postwar period, especially among left-wing last pioneers.

In the Croatian discourse, *devedesete* (the 1990s) are remembered as years marked by war, privatization, and intensified nationalism. Nation-building processes—shaped by the independence of the Republic of Croatia and the rule of Franjo Tuđman—encouraged cultural shifts such as linguistic changes and the consolidation of the Catholic Church's influence. In Serbia, *devedesete* became a code in its own right—a symbol and shorthand for enduring societal regression. As our conversations unfolded, the last pioneers repeatedly invoked familiar tropes: the wars; the complete economic collapse; political repression and the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević; the retraditionalization of society and the growing influence of the Orthodox Church; and the rise of nationalism and the far right, including the repatriarchalization of the society. The most immediate reference to the wars concerned military conscription. The last pioneers recalled their fathers and brothers—especially outside Belgrade—either being drafted or evading the draft. Some remembered friends who were killed, and one himself was conscripted for the war in Kosovo in 1999.

Because we tend to retain most clearly the events that directly affect our lives, it is understandable that the last pioneers in Serbia—or in the other two countries, for that matter—do not recall ethno-national tensions and incidents that occurred in regions they never visited or to which they had no personal ties, particularly when such events received little or no media coverage. One example in Serbia is Sandžak,[4] which is almost never

4 Sandžak is a region spanning southwestern Serbia and eastern Montenegro, where the majority of the population identifies as Bosniak and Muslim. Despite the tensions of the 1990s and incidents of repression against Bosniaks by Serbian police and paramilitary units—including serious crimes such as the Štrpci massacre—the region remained largely calm during the wars and stayed within the two republics. As a border region, Sandžak experienced an economic upswing during the conflict due to smuggling. Since the 2000s, however, the privatization of industry and the end of wartime smuggling—at least not at the scale seen during the conflict—the region has faced severe economic decline. Today, political parties from Sandžak take an active role in the political life of both Serbia and Montenegro.

mentioned in the narratives of the last pioneers who are not from the region. The closer one's intimate link to particular events, the stronger the memories of them, and the more likely these elements are to appear in one's attempts to make sense of the Yugoslav Wars.

Given that most of the Yugoslav Wars took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo, a key element in memories of the 1990s in Serbia is the economic crash. Hyperinflation, widespread impoverishment, teachers selling secondhand goods at markets, and—due to sanctions—a pervasive sense that their world had shrunk: these were the dominant associations among the last pioneers interviewed in Serbia. Speaking in her parliamentary office, Karolina, a member of parliament with a minority background, described her conviction that her generation was deprived of the stable middle-class life her parents had enjoyed in Yugoslav times. Her childhood, she explained, became dependent on foreign aid:

> And the first scholarship … I think it was in the fifth, sixth grade. Because the Hungarians were sending help—the Hungarian government [gave] help to the pupils. … I remember that I applied for the first scholarship and it was one liter of oil, one kilogram of flour, one kilogram of sugar, etc. And, I don't know, some sneakers that were imported from God knows where.… That was a scholarship. There was no money.… Those are my memories of my primary school.

The economic crisis—perceived by many as never having truly ended—forms a key lens through which the last pioneers in Serbia interpret the present. They attribute today's political and economic difficulties to the 1990s, either as a period of deep societal regression from which Serbia has not recovered, or as the legacy of political figures from that era who continue to shape public life. Across political orientations, the last pioneers insist on the significance of a generational divide. Stevan, the right-wing MP, argued for generational renewal, stating that Serbia needs politicians who are not "part of that political swamp of the 1990s … [we need] people who understand the times in which we live, regardless of whether they are oriented to the right or to the left … we simply need a change."

At the same time, anti-1990s and anti-Milošević narratives are not ideologically uniform. Among right-wing interviewees, being "against Milošević" in the 1990s is retrospectively framed as being against communism, reflecting the complex ideological persona Milošević cultivated—as a self-styled guardian of Yugoslavia, of socialism, and of nationalism all at once.

Understanding the Dissolution and the Wars

Navigating the complexities of the 1990s requires grappling with both the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia and the wars that followed. Among the last pioneers, the most common shared narrative is that ordinary people were the true victims: the dissolution was politically induced—even if perhaps inevitable—but the war was certainly imposed from above.

In Serbia, research from 2001 already showed that 62% of citizens considered the war "unnecessary," 29% believed it was "imposed by politicians," and only 9% viewed it as "inevitable and justified" (Gredelj 2001, 241–260). Nationalist propaganda had become widespread by the 1980s, and not only through the ruling regime; opposition parties often articulated even stronger anticommunist and thus anti-Yugoslav positions. Distancing is the dominant discursive strategy: responsibility is attributed to the political elites of the era and to foreign powers.

Our last pioneers recognize the broader context—the fall of the Berlin Wall, the triumph of capitalism, and the economic crisis of the 1980s—even if these factors were absent from their childhood memories. Among left-wing actors, explanations tend to be twofold: continuous political and economic crises fuelled nationalism and populism, and generational turnover within the Party produced a drift away from the core values of socialism. Centrist and right-wing activists, by contrast, emphasize ethno-national identity, arguing—as Bogdan put it—that Yugoslavia consisted of "conflicted tribes since forever," and that the communist trope of brotherhood and unity merely suppressed nationalist frustrations.[5]

Left-wing actors are more likely to maintain a coherent continuity between their Yugoslav childhoods and their present identities. Miloš, a trade-union activist who openly treasures his nostalgia, commented on the famous funeral of Tito that he recently stumbled upon while watching television with his children. Seeing archival footage of Yugoslavs crying across the country, he recounted: "My children asked me, when they saw it on television, 'Why is everybody crying?' … and I told them … 'Because, my children, subconsciously they knew that it will only get worse and worse." Every time we tell a memory, it is a memory of the way we told the same story the last time—enriched by new facts, insights, and questions, and refracted through one's current generational and political positionality.

5 As previously noted, for a categorization of different explanations for the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, see Dragović-Soso 2008.

Nevertheless, the impulse to distance onself from the wars endures. Dora, a member of a left-wing political party in Croatia—and originally from Slavonia, one of the regions most affected by the conflict—explained: "It [war] had nothing to do with the people who lived there and who still live there." Among left-wing last pioneers, the dissolution of Yugoslavia is typically attributed to a constellation of external and structural factors: foreign actors (including the United States and the Catholic Church); populism; the 1974 Constitution; and the transition to capitalism, inducing the first accumulation of capital which in their view required a violent conflict. When domestic actors are mentioned, they are framed as traitors within the Yugoslav People's Army.

While all interviewees acknowledge the complexity of the dissolution, the specific elements they foreground reveal how their narratives are interwoven with their personal (hi)stories. Notably, left-wing last pioneers in both Serbia and Croatia emphasized the role of the Yugoslav middle classes—their parents' generation—whose apathy and lack of intervention, they argue, contributed to the dissolution and the wars. In a café near the parliament in Zagreb, Vuk, an MP from Zadar, concurs with Susan Woodward (1995) that the wars were not the result of any supposed "natural" division among ethno-national groups. He added his own recollection of dissent in the 1990s:

> In Zadar, I was one of two people who were buying *Hrvatska ljevica* [Croatian Left],[6] by Stipe Šuvar.[7] I reacted that way then.... There were only two of us in Zadar, me and one history teacher, I remember. The saleswoman told me that nobody else asks for it and I know that when I was carrying that *Croatian Left* on the streets ... it provoked reactions: Why do I need that? Yugoslavia is over, vanished. But for me, it was only a shield and possibly a way to protest and provoke the public.

The centrist and right-wing political actors, at this point in the conversation, enter the space of cognitive dissonances. As they began narrating their ethno-national interpretations of the dissolution and the wars, they frequently did not notice the contradictions embedded in their accounts. When they did recognize them, the dissonance was resolved through

6 *Hrvatska ljevica* was a monthly magazine published from 1993 to 2005.

7 Šuvar was a prominent sociologist and Croatian politician, a member of the Communist Party, a high official in various positions (minister of education of the Socialist Republic of Croatia, member of the Central Committee, etc.), and a fervent Marxist until his death in 2004.

claims of exceptionality and singularity: their immediate environments experienced no ethno-national tensions, but this, they insisted, was not representative. Within the interview itself, many last pioneers began reflecting on these inconsistencies and, through re-narration, entered a new process of meaning-making.

Eric Hobsbawm famously noted that: "If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented" (Hobsbawm 1997, 5). Revisionism operates at both collective and individual levels, and the mechanisms often mirror one another. When individuals struggle to reconcile their own memories, they may gravitate toward the ready-made explanations offered by mainstream discourses, thereby resolving cognitive dissonances while keeping the most intimate elements tucked away as nostalgia.

While last pioneers of similar political orientations in Croatia and Serbia often diagnose the conflict as rooted in insurmountable ethno-national and religious animosities, Croatian interviewees added another layer: Serbian nationalism. These examples illustrate how present political positionality shapes and contorts memory narratives. Even when interviewees have no recollection of ethno-national tensions in their childhoods, the discursive strategy of framing their own environment as a singular exception takes precedence. Although they maintain that war should have been avoided, the dominant conclusion is that history has demonstrated the *impossibility* of Yugoslavia.

Within the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), interviewees disagree on whether multinational states are viable at all. Borna, the most right-wing Croatian MP in our sample, described Yugoslavia as "an artificial creation" and invoked the familiar trope of a "thousand-year yearning for Croatian independence." Yet even among right-wing last pioneers, the complexity of the conflict is acknowledged. As Andrija, an HDZ member, put it, the war ultimately stemmed from a "conflict of interest, conflict of ego, and conflict of nationality."

Most of the interviewees on the center and the right in Croatia expressed satisfaction with the country's independence, and Borna, as a far-right last pioneer, gradually shifted from his mellow childhood narratives to align with his political positionality:

> My wife has her first cousin in Belgrade.... Her mother is from Split, from Dalmatia. She married a Serb and in 1990 they ran away,... ran away, I have to say, because they had [a bad time] here ... as teenagers. She told us how he got beaten up in the streets [in Šibenik].... Let's be clear, war is always a mess. And he, a child who was a Serb, with his father in the

> JNA, he got beaten up in the streets. It's an ugly thing, but in the war many worse things happened than getting a couple of slaps on the street.

Talking to Borna was actually a delight. He created a warm and welcoming atmosphere, repeatedly emphasizing that his closest circle remains ethno-nationally and politically "mixed," and ending with jokes about how I might one day marry in Croatia—at which point I promised to invite him as my best man. Yet knowing his public discourse, and hearing moments like the one above that reveal his political stance, the conversation left much unsaid: if a (new) war were to break out *overnight*, my new friend would still see me as the Other. His right-wing political orientation is clearly rooted in early family socialization and paternal heritage. At the same time, Borna described a Yugoslav childhood surrounded by friends of different ethno-nationalities, producing a dissonance between intimate experience and public positioning. These two seemingly contradictory elements have shaped him into what he himself calls an unusually open far-right political actor—a hypothesis that certainly warrants future research.

Understandings of the dissolution and the wars did not differ significantly among the last pioneers in Slovenia, despite the country's comparatively limited wartime experience. They generally attributed the dissolution to foreign interests, economic crises, and the ambitions of particular individuals and nationalist elites. Some described these dynamics as "teenage moves," "ego trips," or "too much testosterone." On the left, a palpable melancholy remains. For Anton—perhaps because he is the child of a mixed marriage, grew up in Primorska, maintained close ties across the (post)Yugoslav space through his work, belongs to the generation of the last pioneers, or identifies strongly with the left—the aftermath is clear: "I look now at 1991 and the war. Nobody came out as a victor from that war, we are all losers, from the first to the last. And in an economic, and above all, a political aspect … Yugoslavia mattered, much more than any of these countries today matter on their own."

Yet across these attempts at understanding, what stands out most are confusion, dissociation, uncertainty, and the impossibility of establishing clarity about the "true" causes of the dissolution and the wars. While the victims are consistently identified as "the peoples," it remains unclear who the perpetrators were. Dora, from Osijek—disillusioned with contemporary party politics yet still active—described a dissociation from the war even as events unfolded: "We acted like it was happening to someone else. But no one ever said that comrade Tito is guilty of it. Just simply, they are shooting. And who are they? Well, them from Bosnia. That's how it was." Surviving the war

was the immediate priority; ethno-national identifications of victims and perpetrators became normalized only afterward, flattening the diversity of experiences on the ground. The referent of "us" remains unstable: sometimes Yugoslavs; sometimes Croats/Serbs/Slovenes; sometimes simply "the people." Across these shifting frames, the people are consistently portrayed as being driven from above into war. Drawing on his extensive historical knowledge, Dejan—a left-wing activist and refugee from Slavonia—recalled the early stages of the conflict: "I mean, somebody consciously put arms into the people's hands … so that when the Croatian army started conquering the territory of the [Serbian] rebels, Serbs would start shooting, Croats would kill some Serbs, and then Belgrade TV could say 'look, Ustashas are once again killing Serbs.'"

As much as foreign interference appears across the narratives of the last pioneers in all three republics, it emerges most prominently in those from Serbia. Radmila, a member of parliament belonging to a long-standing left-wing party—the so-called established left—originally comes from Kosovo but now lives in Belgrade. She invited me to her office in the party headquarters, a building in the city center that I immediately recognized from the anti-government protests of the 1990s. As her secretary brings in Turkish coffee, the conversation begins to flow with ease, despite my initial sense of intimate edginess. Radmila explains her views calmly: "Did we really fight in Croatia only because we were Serbs and Croats? Did we really fight in Bosnia only because we were Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats? Or did we fight as toy soldiers of someone else who has nicely distributed us on the Monopoly board?" A sense of helplessness and the conviction that the war—which violently disrupted their childhood—was imposed from above, bringing with it new identities and new histories, is shared among our last pioneers across the three countries.

Some further peculiarities in how the wars are understood emerge in Serbia, particularly among right-wing pioneers. The question of whether the conflict was a Yugoslav civil war or a war between already independent states often remained unresolved. Kosovo typically appeared as the root of all Yugoslav conflicts—whether through ethno-national tensions between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, or through its status as the poorest region, which, in their view, generated dissatisfaction within the Slovenian branch of the Party. For right-wing interviewees in Serbia, "the communists" were most frequently held responsible, their supposed lack of political maturity in resolving conflicts attributed to their communist ideology. More broadly, the conclusion persists that Serbia was the biggest loser of the Yugoslav Wars.

Yet it is important to note that attributing responsibility to "foreign powers" does not always function as an avoiding strategy, nor does it necessarily fall within the realm of conspiracy. Rather, it is introduced as one among multiple causes and actors implicated in the Yugoslav Wars. Paradoxically—or perhaps predictably—the trope of foreign interference appears in the narratives as a unifying element, countering interpretations that frame the conflict as driven solely by ethno-national animosities and thereby connecting (post)Yugoslav communities across the political spectrum.

Moving through this persistent lack of clarity, a familiar pattern reappears: whenever the current political positionality of our last pioneers aligns with mainstream discourses, individual memory narratives tend to be replaced by them. Saša, a member of parliament from an established left-wing party in Croatia, meets me in his parliamentary office. He seems pressed for time—and indeed, since our interview, he has advanced rapidly within the party hierarchy. He responds energetically, in a short, firm tone:

> So, it happened in Yugoslavia in 1945. We all lived in brotherhood and unity and we all loved each other, but we didn't [really] love each other. There were deep, deep divisions, and society did not work to overcome them. Instead, it was just imposed by decree and [society] said, "Now, everyone's cool." It doesn't work that way. I think that is even a misunderstanding by those who built that country after the Second World War and brought about its failure because they thought it was enough to decide something and then it would happen, and at the same time they committed other horrible injustices. I am talking about socio-economic status. Yes, at first it seemed [fine], but then you make a comparison [and you see that] it was not the same if you were born in Slavonia or if you were born in Kosovo. It was not the same if you were born in Istria or if you were born in the surroundings of Šid. You did not have the same chances.

The sentiment that the political regime of socialist Yugoslavia had made significant errors begins to surface across many narratives attempting to understand the wars—certainly among right-wing and centrist-liberal interviewees, but also within the established left-wing parties. Luka, a member of parliament of a centrist-liberal party who personally leans further to the left, articulates this view with a tone more disappointed than convinced. As we sip our second coffee in a bustling café in Novi Sad, he echoes thoughts similar to Saša's: "That was a defect … because that

country was very complicated, you know.... You have Bled[8] and down there you have Peć."[9] In his account, regional inequalities emerge as one of the most important factors contributing to the fall of Yugoslavia.

All these elements intersect in the last pioneers' narratives, in their search for *truth* about the past. They regard coming to terms with the past as necessary "for a normal future," as Tijana, a centrist-liberal member of parliament from Serbia, puts it. Similar reflections are shared in my interviews in Croatia: Antonio insists that "one cannot forget how it was and how it could have been," while Marta adds: "It seems to me that war is one big lie." However controversial dealing with the past may be, it appears imperative for the last pioneers. As the maestral wind cools the afternoon in Split, Marta leans forward across the table, visibly agitated when discussing imposed ethno-nationalities and nationalist mainstream discourses. She offers an example:

> So, an example from Lastovo.... There was never a war there, there was a big military base. The JNA was a serious army, it was disciplined, and those were professional soldiers with medals. So, at some point they had to leave the base. I mean, what the hell would they still be doing on Lastovo? They left everything orderly and clean, washed, folded sheets, locked all the doors, and left the keys outside. That is how you do it in the countryside, so that a cat wouldn't open the doors. So, we [Croats] were supposed only to come and move in. You could have opened a hotel there the next day. And then people from my village came—I know them personally—and stole the sheets, the sinks. It was convenient for them that that army left. And those people are also minor war criminals, but still war criminals!

But memories of the dissolution and the war in Yugoslavia did not prompt discussions of transitional justice or the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), nor did they lead to explicit attributions of blame. Instead, they revealed a deep need to comprehend how their happy and peaceful Yugoslav childhoods could have been so brutally disrupted. War has not been appropriated as yet another seed of division today, and wartime experiences—difficult as they were—do not appear to have significantly shaped the political positionality of the last pioneers; certainly not to the extent that family influence has. Antea, who experienced considerable

8 Bled is a lake in Slovenia and is one of the country's biggest tourist attractions.

9 Peć, a town in Kosovo, is in one of the poorest regions in the (post)Yugoslav space.

war-related trauma through the friends she hosted from conflict areas in Zagreb, continued to analyze her memories with composure. Yet, for a moment—lighting another cigarette—she became visibly perplexed:

> Everything I loved as a child and that I was proud of as a child was now falling apart in total senselessness. And I had nothing to hang on to, in order to explain it to myself. And then I started learning history manically, and I was growing more bitter. With every piece of new information, I was not finding an explanation of the conflict, but becoming more and more bitter. Why, after forty-five years, did they decide to destroy [Yugoslavia]?

While our last pioneers try to understand how their childhoods fell apart "in total senselessness," mainstream discourses continue to offer nationalist sense-making through historical revisionism. Given that our interviewees are now all political actors, one might expect them to participate actively in public debates on the Yugoslav past. Yet institutionalized memory politics seem still appear to be largely shaped without the direct involvement of their generation. For those who are members of parliament, voting procedures on revisionist legislation typically follow party directives. In most cases, when such laws were adopted in the early 2000s, they were not yet MPs, nor were they positioned high enough within their parties to mount opposition. Social movements that later became political parties often kept their distance from heated historical debates, while some left-wing parties did oppose revisionist efforts. With the exception of Levica in Slovenia and the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) in Croatia—both of which have actively and openly participated in commemorations of the Partisan anti-fascist struggle of the Second World War—few parties have left the imprint of a political actor advancing a strong counter-narrative. This raises the question: what does the dialogue between the life stories of the last pioneers and the mainstream revisionist discourses actually look like?

State Production of Revisionist Discourses: Institutionalization and Reception

In all (post)Yugoslav countries, historical-revisionist claims revolve around the Second World War and are typically advanced by anticommunist and anti-Yugoslav actors. In Slovenia, revisionism is embodied in Janez Janša—once an active communist, now leader of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), a right-wing ethno-nationalist, and Minister of

Defense during the 1990s. He has served three times as Prime Minister since the 2000s (2004–2008; 2012–2013; and 2020–2022). On numerous occasions, he has been criticized for circulating false historical claims in his anticommunist declarations, including the assertion that the genocide in Srebrenica was a consequence of communist crimes in Yugoslavia (Janša 2020). Since 2026, Janša has been re-elected as a Prime Minister in Slovenia, yet again.

While political leaders in Croatia fervently distance themselves from Yugoslavia, Serbian leaders adopt a more ambiguous stand. Aleksandar Vučić, now President of the Republic of Serbia and previously Prime Minister, frequently invokes comparisons with Tito in his populist self-presentation, claiming to have achieved more than Tito ("Vučić: Za tri godine uradio sam koliko i Tito u bivšoj Jugoslaviji," 2016). At the same time, when discussing workers' rights, he emphasizes the need to abandon socialist policies, criticizing what he calls a lingering "socialist mentality". Serbia's mainstream discourse is more complex, shaped by its structural position before, during, and after the Yugoslav Wars. Slobodan Milošević framed Serbia's participation as an attempt to preserve Yugoslavia, while simultaneously denying that Serbia was involved in the wars at all. He never distanced himself from socialism, a position reinforced by his wife, Mirjana Marković, who remained a nominally fervent communist throughout his rule. It was in the 1990s that Serbian ethno-nationalist discourse articulated what Nataša Govedarica describes as an "ambivalent position in which nationalism found itself regarding Yugoslavia as a vault of Serbs, but also claiming that Serbs were the only Yugoslavs, rejecting communism that was killing the Serbian nation, but at the same time claiming that only the Serbs were Partisans" (2012, 184).

Following the development of anticommunist memory regimes across Central and Eastern Europe (Dujisin 2020, 2024), another memory institute has been established in Slovenia by the Slovenian Democratic Party in 2008: the Study Center for National Reconciliation (*Študijski center za narodno spravo*). Among its various activities, it even sought to demonstrate that Slovenes are not Slavs (Jager 2020). Comparable institutes were not established in Croatia or Serbia, yet other national institutions played a prominent role in supporting anticommunist discourses (Vučetić 2018b). Revisionism was particularly visible in national museums, especially the history museums that replaced museums of the revolution. During the 1990s, these institutions became propagators of ethno-nationalist discourses and transmitters of ethno-national victimization discourses as foundational myths. While more recent shifts have been noted in the Croatian History Museum, the Historical

Museum of Serbia continues to employ some of the most conservative approaches (Popović and Jagdhuhn 2024). In Serbian history textbooks, Draža Mihailović—leader of the Chetnik movement—is suddenly presented as a well-educated, respectable figure, while the Chetniks' collaboration with Nazi forces was rarely, if ever, mentioned (Stojanović 2010, 136–137). "New reconstructed nationhood narratives" found their places in history textbooks across the (post)Yugoslav space (Pavasović Trošt 2018, 2019, 2020; Trbovc and Pavasović Trošt 2017).

Some strategies are shared across all three states: reliance on the (pre-) historical roots of the nation and the nationalization of history; the erasure of any connections to the Yugoslav state (Pavlaković 2014); and, in particular, the nationalization of antifascism (Đurašković 2016; Đureinović 2018a, 2018b). These processes were accompanied by struggles to monopolize a particular version of historical interpretation, leading in Slovenia to the erection of more than two hundred new monuments portraying Second World War collaborators as victims (Luthar 2018, 34). Antifascism was no longer framed as Yugoslav, but Croatian, Serbian, or Slovenian.

Janez, a member of the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party led by Janez Janša, is highly active at the local level. He explains his understanding of contemporary revisionist debates with clear adherence to mainstream discourses: "The point is the following: the difference between the left and the right in Slovenia is that … the right says that abuses and crimes happened on both sides, so all dead should be buried [with dignity]; the left says they only happened on one side, so only some should be buried. That is not right, that is not a basis for a state."

A recurring pattern of some right-wing, anti-Yugoslav last pioneers was the tendency to give short and concise answers, with little desire to elaborate. If I waited in silence, they would often simply take another sip of coffee, another drag of a cigarette, and wait for the next question. But Jože, a member of parliament from the same political party, expressed somewhat more nuanced views in his parliamentary office: "Look, Yugoslavia existed. Full stop. No one can say that it did not exist, and we must inquire what was good in Yugoslavia, read it and transfer it to today; and what was bad, we should leave in those times." Heterogeneity within the same political party was not unusual.

Mainstream memory politics often remained porous, fluid, and shifting throughout the dissolution of Yugoslavia—much as they are today. Even if this variation reflects the greater freedom of expression available to regular party members compared to MPs, it can also be read as a matter of political experience. In any case, this example illustrates the ongoing negotiation

of memory narratives and mainstream discourses that continues to shape the (post)Yugoslav political landscape to this day.

On the left, our last pioneers criticize revisionist efforts while still acknowledging the ambiguities of Yugoslav history. At the same time, they perceive certain positive shifts in the last decade. Rok, a member of parliament for the left-wing party Levica, invited me to his parliamentary office for the interview; over several hours we moved from his childhood to his understanding of contemporary politics in Slovenia. He noted: "When you say you are a socialist [today], you don't think now that people will laugh at you; it has become [again] a legitimate political position." Yet being socialist and being Yugonostalgic are not one and the same, despite what mainstream discourses often imply. Ivan, left-wing activist in Slovenia, still perceives Yugonostalgia as a banal, commodified emotion: "In one sense, you see a bunch of Slovenes go to Belgrade for New Year's Eve and there they buy nostalgia… and then, those same Slovenes come back to Slovenia and say that Yugoslavia is communism, totalitarianism, everything that was happening after Second World War, killing everyone." The multiplicity of meanings contained within the term Yugonostalgia—as it is used today—clearly obfuscates contemporary ideological debates. Behind the tourist industry and its commodified imagery, far more is at play.

Sometimes, for the last pioneers, the demonization of the Yugoslav past seems absurd or even grotesque. The common trope—voiced by several right-wing last pioneers—that Croats never shared a Yugoslav identity is countered by statements like Filip's: "Nobody was holding a gun to anyone's head to cry when Tito died in 1980." Others challenge claims of economic scarcity in Yugoslav times. Fabijan remarks: "They say we did not have computers. Well, nobody [in the world] had computers [at that time], come on, remember when the PC came into wider use!" Filip similarly believes that anti-Yugoslav discourses aim to erase memories of economic progress: "It's not only the point that we liberated ourselves from fascism, but also that we were manufacturing submarines."

In a quiet garden in Split, Antonio—once a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina—outlines the contradictions embedded in institutionalized revisionist discourses:

> It's taboo [to talk about Yugoslavia], and it is stupid to have any taboos. It is simply pointless. And it is awkward here … because the whole of Split, two-thirds of Split, was built under socialism. The majority of those people got the social housing … and worked in that industry, and now … they largely vote for HDZ. Not all of them, but a large majority,…

> especially the working class.... I think that all those leftist initiatives, and *Radnička fronta* and *Marks21*,[10] they're all pure bullshit, pardon me. Their understanding of the economy, that those [people who were responsible for the dissolution] used nationalism to cover the theft. I think it is the other way around,... that they were primarily fascists, and then they stole on the side because they could. There is not one rational reason why anyone who got everything from socialism would be a hard nationalist. They can say whatever they want now.... It's a fact.

Antonio's frustration extends beyond historical debates to the broader political situation in Croatia seemed actively annoyed with the overall situation in Croatia:

> Everybody subconsciously knows that it is not better today, not in any way.... It is better insofar as you formally have a democracy. But under 50% of people vote. It is clear that it is misplaced, a lost [chance]. It is clear that we live in misery and everyone who is rational understands that it is stupid to be in the EU and to have borders with people with whom they share their language. I mean, everybody knows that.

Not *everybody* knows that, of course, but at least some of our last pioneers insist that the planned forgetting and erasure of Yugoslav memories cannot succeed, and that it is only a matter of time before there will be more space for debate, at which point their generation will finally have its say. Continuing the longest interview over cookies and coffee in his room, Fabijan expresses his anger with striking clarity:

> someone wants to dictate my memories and what they should be like, what I should remember and how it actually was for me, and they don't have a clue. Especially with everything happening to me and my family at the beginning of the war, when we moved here [Zagreb]. People who didn't move an inch and had nothing happening to them, they have the right to dictate to me how and what.

For many last pioneers, the erasure of Yugoslavia from public discourse fuels the sentiment that their own identities are being erased—stripping away

10 Marks21 is a left-wing organization in Serbia founded in 2008. It is rooted in the ideas of Marxism and the traditions of internationalist socialism.

key moments in their life narratives and contradicting the lived histories that continue to shape their sense of self.

Many of the left-wing pioneers in Croatia noted that the 2009 Blockade—the massive strike and occupation of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb, which then spread across the country—marked a turning point. In their view, the student movement that coalesced around the protest reshaped the Croatian political landscape, inaugurating a new era even if its influence was initially marginal. Among other effects, it contributed to a subtle but perceptible shift in the Yugoslav taboo, even if not nearly enough.

The Second World War and Reconciliation Tropes

Ethno-nationalization was further reinforced through reconciliation discourses, most often appropriated by the interviewed right-wing and centrist-liberal last pioneers. Drawing on the myth of the Second World War as a *fratricidal conflict*—a framing that twists the ideological dimensions of intra-national struggles—revisionist narratives seek to unite the populations of the newly founded nation-states on the basis of ethno-national belonging, in explicit opposition to the Yugoslav concept of brotherhood and unity. Already in the early 1990s, under Franjo Tuđman, reconciliation discourses normalized the Ustasha movement from the Second World War. By 2011, only one-third of Croatian citizens considered the Ustasha a fascist movement (Pavlaković 2016, 44). In 1996, Tuđman proposed that Jasenovac become a symbol of reconciliation between Croats, arguing that "both Ustasha and Partisans fought for a Croatian state" (Banjeglav 2012, 107). These reconciliation discourses were embedded in the broader European memory regime of two totalitarianisms, and the path toward EU accession in Croatia and Slovenia further strengthened revisionist claims.

No memory is apolitical, which is precisely why the use of the past plays such an integral role in contemporary societies. Reflecting on the function of anti-Yugoslav mainstream memory politics, Vito, a left-wing party member in Zagreb, elaborates:

> Yes, the debates on the Second World War are debates on the present, or actually the future. You have to demonize communism, so that everything from back then would seem worse, so that we don't see how today is worse in so many ways. So, when they say, "Let's not talk about the past,"

> those talks about the past are actually the debates about the present and the future. As much as they might not be aware of it on the right, that is actually what it is. Simply, if you say I want public health, [which we had] in Yugoslavia, so you are Serbo-Chetnik. But it works much less today than it did ten years ago. Things change [very] little.

While most revisionism is embedded in Second World War themes, as in Slovenia and Serbia, in Croatia there is an attempt to draw parallels with the Homeland War, defining it as ground zero for the creation of Croatian national identity (Jović 2017, 12) and establishing a consensus that it was "a justified struggle for independence, cutting all ties with Yugoslav history and the idea of Yugoslavism" (Pavlaković 2016, 27–28). The ICTY's overturning of the convictions of Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač for war crimes during Operation Storm fortified the narrative of victimhood and the "exoneration of Croatian war-sins" (Milošević 2017, 898). Even for those on the left, Yugoslavia remains something of a "forbidden" word, while mainstream anti-Yugoslavism remains strong. As Antonio in Split put it succinctly: "The whole identity of contemporary Croatia is actually built on the dissolution of Yugoslavia." What is dismissed as simple Yugonostalgia in public discourse is in fact an attempt at a complex understanding of Yugoslav history, society, and ideology. For those on the left, the last pioneers strive to acknowledge the ambivalences of Yugoslav history, repeating the idioms "it was not black and white," or "it was not all good or all bad."

The mainstream anticommunist and anti-Yugoslav discourse remains equally complex, multi-layered, and contradictory. The porosity of both the revisionist and the so-called nostalgic discourses creates space for ongoing fluctuations and negotiations between different memories, making them adaptable to contemporary political and ideological purposes. As we continue our conversation in his parliamentary office, Jakov explains the contradictions of revisionist efforts in Croatia:

> He [Andrija Hebrang] is today considered a hero because he was a victim of the communist system, because he was pro-Croatian. It is not true; he was a Stalinist, a Cominternist. He was a bigger communist than Tito, worse, and nobody will say it. No, today he is a Croatian victim, a Croatian martyr. These are crazy things. Now they are removing the name of Marshal Tito from the square, but we have Hebrang Street. How is that possible? The man who led pogroms in Croatia! He is responsible for Bleiburg: not Tito, but him. He was a direct commander.

Ambiguity toward the established truths of victims and perpetrators from the Second World War continues to spread, appearing through official commemorations. In July 2020, Slovenian President Borut Pahor, from the center-left Social Democrats, joined commemorations for "the victims of Titoist terror" organized by Italian fascist groups. Levica was the only political party at the time that vigorously criticized these events. This is the context within which the last pioneers operate as political actors. Ivica Račan, the former Croatian Prime Minister from the Social Democratic Party, attended both the Jasenovac[11] and Bleiburg[12] commemorations (Banjeglav 2012, 110),[13] discursively equating the victims of the Nazi ideology of extermination and the victims of battles at the end of the war. The systematic demolition of monuments in Croatia (Horvatinčić 2015) sheds light on the violent ideological struggle (see figure 4.1). As Reinhardt Koselleck explains: "Memorials are taken down when they are felt to be a threat or when a tradition that is still living is intended to be suppressed" (2002, 325).

As a generation is formed through experiences connected by interpretation (Mannheim 1952), the last pioneers do not discuss the Second World War in depth in their narratives, despite the fact that national-level mainstream memory battles continue to revolve around it. Some interviewees expressed a sense of pride or even disbelief in the achievements of the Partisans, while a few right-wing ones draw a link between the Second World War and the wars of the 1990s, but no more than this. Interestingly, the majority of historians have self-identified as right-wing. Caution arises when they

11 Jasenovac was a concentration and extermination camp in Slavonia, operated by the fascist Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which imprisoned Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political opponents. The latest estimation is that between 80,000 and 100,000 people were killed there.

12 In May 1945, the Axis collaborating forces of the NDH, together with Chetniks, White Guards in Slovenia, and some civilians, fled the liberation of Yugoslavia with the aim of surrendering to the British Army. In Bleiburg, a small Austrian town in Carinthia, the British forces returned them to the Yugoslav Partisan forces. The Partisans killed large numbers of these prisoners, with the definitive numbers and the precise nature of the events still contested in historiography. Bleiburg became a symbolic site of commemoration, particularly for Ustasha supporters, rich in fascist insignia and folklore, which led the Austrian National Council to adopt a resolution calling for the banning of the event in July 2020; it was finally banned in 2021.

13 The attendees at both venues included Ivica Račan and Ivo Josipović. Josipović explained his participation as the need to politically "conclude this issue and let the conclusions be made by historians" (Banjeglav 2012, 115). By contrast, President Stjepan Mesić, also from the Social Democratic Party, never participated in Bleiburg commemorations. This highlights the potential for dissonant voices within the same political parties and cracks in the coherence of the hegemonic discourses.



Figure 4.1. Partisan monument in Osijek, author's archive, 2017.

attempt to establish their own version of historical developments, which appears to be a natural response to the cacophony of cognitive dissonances in both public and private spaces.

Reconciliation and Reception

Memorials were taken down and new laws were introduced, especially following the nationalization of antifascism. In 2000, when Milošević's regime fell as a result of electoral defeat and the so-called October 5 revolution, the new political elites from the opposition parties "freed" Serbia from him but also from communism. True revisionist policies were implemented only then, through parliamentary memory laws. In 2000, when the Croatian Parliament adopted the Declaration on the Homeland War,[14] reinforcing a unique "regime of truth" about Yugoslav history, our last pioneers were still not in parliament. In 2005, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Declaration on Antifascism, establishing antifascism as one of the foundational values of the Croatian state; the following year, it adopted a Declaration on the

14 Homeland War, or *Domovinski rat*, is how the war in the 1990s is referred to in Croatia.

condemnation of crimes committed during the *totalitarian* communist regime in Croatia 1945–1990 (Đurašković 2016, 113). Antifascism was separated from communism, and, following mainstream European discourses, communism and fascism were equated as totalitarian ideologies.

In Serbia in 2004, the Law on the Rights of Veterans, War Invalids, and Their Family Members[15] granted veterans of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland and Ravna Gora Chetniks the same status as the Partisans. Two years later, the Law on Rehabilitation[16] aimed to secure the "rehabilitation of individuals who were, without an administrative or court ruling, deprived of their life, liberty, or other rights in the period from April 6, 1941, to the day of implementation of this law, and who lived on the territory of the Republic of Serbia"; this law was further amended in 2011. In 2009, the government initiated the formation of the State Committee for Determining the Circumstances of the Execution of General Dragoljub Draža Mihailović and the State Committee for Finding and Marking Secret Graves with Remains of the Individuals who were Executed after the Liberation in 1944 (shortened to State Committee for the Secret Graves of Individuals Executed after September 12, 1944) (Radanović 2014, 143–174). All these legislative changes were initiated and supported by the Democratic Party, before the consolidation of power by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (Radanović 2012). During this time, our last pioneers were still young members within the ruling political parties or non-institutional political activists, with even less real power than at the time of the research.

After the wars, revisionist discourses helped strengthen the ethno-national animosities and segregation in societies. Among citizens, opposition to right-wing readings of history existed from the beginning of the end of socialist Yugoslavia. In public polls from the early 1990s, only 23.3% of citizens in Slovenia openly demanded "a completely independent state"; the majority (50.6%) preferred to see Slovenia "as a state within a Yugoslav confederation, with large autonomy for some republics" (Jović 2017, 46). Supporting the claims by our last pioneers that the war was primarily instigated from the top down, Dejan Jović argues that war was initially "one of the possibilities, and then everything was done to make it the only possibility" (Jović 2017, 85), creating an atmosphere of "ethno-totalitarianism of everyday life" (Jović 2017, 26). Despite these pre-war reflections, the wars and subsequent ethno-nationalization in the (post)Yugoslav states produced

15 Zakon o pravima boraca, vojnih invalida i članova njihovih porodica, Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 137/04.

16 Zakon o rehabilitaciji, Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 33/06, 92/11.

real consequences, including a wholesale transformation of ethno-national landscapes. In Croatia in 1991, 581,663 people identified as Serbs; by 2001, the number had fallen to 201,631. The decline continued, reaching 186,633 in 2011 (Jović 2017, 228) and 123,892 in 2021 (Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske). Reconciliation efforts targeted only majority ethno-national communities.

The sole political party within the parliament opposing the revisionist legislation mentioned above was the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), despite having been in power in the 1990s and thus bearing responsible for the dissolution and the wars. Radmila, a member of this party and a member of parliament, stands firmly against the oblivion of antifascism:

> Those are the historical facts. And based on that [the facts] you could determine what you think about it. If you were a healthy child from a healthy family, and the majority of us were, then it was natural to choose the side of Boško Buha[17] … my disrespect toward Chetniks is a consequence, how should I put it, of what I know about that war, because I was told by the people I trust and I believe that everything they said is completely true.

For Radmila, the left-wing, antifascist orientation of SPS was decisive in joining the party, as was her personal experience of growing up in Kosovo. Antifascism appears prominently across the political spectrum and carries a European resonance. Luka, from a centrist-liberal party but identifying as its most left-leaning member, considers antifascism an essential element of European heritage: "They [antifascist struggles] are not denied in Austria, they are not denied in Germany, not in France, Poland, Italy … So, it has to be a backbone, you cannot be ashamed of Sutjeska and Neretva." Yet the complex processes of "de-communizing" antifascism are also part of European memory politics and transnational activism (Grosescu et al., 2020), thereby supporting revisionist efforts in the (post)Yugoslav space.

Among the interviewees in Serbia with the most fervent revisionist views was Goran, a self-identified libertarian and member of parliament, apparently impatient to leave the interview: "Antifascism is a Yugoslav fabrication which was used to cover the fact that, when the Russians occupied us, our freedom was taken away. And that denial of freedom did not differ at all

17 Boško Buha (1926–1943) was a pioneer hero, a fighter in the Second Proletarian Brigade, and a war hero of Yugoslavia. He was killed by Chetniks in an ambush, becoming a symbol of the antifascist resistance and the Partisans.

from that of the fascists in 1941. So that we wouldn't call it a communist revolution, we made up the term antifascism." Despite, or in line with, his center-liberal orientation, Goran's views align with the right-wing pioneers, repeating tropes about communist repression and the elimination of "tens of thousands" of members of the Serbian intellectual elite, without engaging more deeply or offering further reflection. This example leads us further into apparent commonalities between the two groups of the last pioneers.

Aligning with Anti-Yugoslavism

Across all three researched countries, among the right-wing and center-liberal last pioneers, anticommunist discourses appeared just as frequently as anti-Yugoslavism. Communism was consistently presented as more repressive in their own respective republics: Slovenian anticommunists claimed repression in Yugoslavia was strongest in Slovenia; Serbian anticommunists claimed repression was strongest in Serbia; and Croatian anticommunists claimed it was strongest in Croatia. Repression was cited as a well-known fact or common knowledge, but with little or no personal memory to support it.

Goran, the previously quoted jumpy libertarian MP and fervent anti-Yugoslav, elaborates: "What I understood, at the age of thirteen, is that we were living in a society where there was no freedom. And it was getting on my nerves … to me, freedom was always the most important thing in life, and I would give up anything except freedom, so I was happy that communism was falling apart." Goran's narrative was the only one that directly expressed happiness at the dissolution of the country. The other interviewees, even when political imprisonment or political emigration existed in their extended families, tended toward more balanced reflections on the Yugoslav system.

We remember Borna, the "atypical" far-right last pioneer from Dalmatia and a Croatian MP. Despite the joyous childhood memories at the beginning of his narrative, once we turned to the dissolution and the more (un)official interpretations of recent history, he aligned more steadily with his political positionality:

> We often say in Croatia, [that the country was] a prison for the Croatian people and it really was that. If you know that in Šibenik, only Serbs were police captains … since forever. If you know that in a total of five high schools [in Šibenik], in four, the directors were Serbs. If you know that in all possible key positions—now I speak only in the context of Serbs and

> Croats—all were Serbs. If you know that in the Yugoslav People's Army … how many generals were Serbs, how many Croats? I never heard someone cursing a "Partisan mother," a "German mother," or a "Chetnik mother." Obviously, I am remembering now, most of those fights, those quarrels, were with Orthodox Serbs. So, someone taught someone, at some point in time, that their family was different and then, he swore at my "*Ustasha* mother." So [this is how it was] in 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986.

Explaining why he opposes positive memories of Yugoslavia, even though he himself had shared many during the interview, he continued:

> It gets on my nerves that, today, we started talking about Yugoslavia as a myth.… It was nice in Yugoslavia. It was nice for me in Yugoslavia. You know why? Because I was a kid. When I remember queues for bread, queues for oil, for detergent.… My parents did not have a vacation house because they were not in the Party… or, for example, you have Catholic Christmas, an important holiday that was always respected in the Croatian nation. We went to school on that day. Not only did we go to school, but some teachers would give assignments on that day [on purpose].

Another view criticizing the secular state regime in Yugoslavia came from Samid, a member of parliament from Sandžak, who viewed Yugoslav policies and the Women's Anti-fascist Front as a violent attack on the patriarchal family and Muslim religion through legislation prohibiting wearing the veil.[18] By contrast, Zvjezdana, the Catholic conservative last pioneer from a politically "mixed" Yugoslav family in Osijek, held more ambiguous views of Yugoslav history while embracing social-democratic values framed in Christianity, even though she now openly distances herself from the Catholic Church. Her memories of religious freedom in Yugoslavia are as follows:

> We were not allowed to go to religious education.… Our teacher was calling us out, asking who attends religious education.… Then he would make a list.… I don't know how it was in Serbia. We were on a list. What can we do? [We were] children. We raised our hands. They had us somewhere in a little black notebook, but we did not suffer any consequences because of that. I cannot say. I don't know if we were protected because my father was in the Party. I cannot say that. But I know Mom was always saying, "Don't say you go to church." They were hiding it. They were hiding that

18 In 1951, Yugoslavia adopted the Law on the Prohibition of Wearing the Veil.

> we had two uncles in Germany. They were hiding that the third uncle was persecuted by the UDBA [Directorate for State Security]. He had a lot of troubles.

Just minutes earlier, Zvjezdana had recounted how her father defied the Party by marrying in a church for her mother's sake, and how he woke her and her siblings every Sunday for church despite his own atheism and communism.

Just as Borna claimed that his family did not own a vacation house because they were not members of the Party, Dominik, an MP from the HDZ, argued that one could not even obtain an apartment without Party membership; he was fortunate to have a grandfather who was a Partisan, so this was not an issue for his family. Saša, an MP from the SDP, recalling economic scarcity in the 1980s and the global gas crisis when the car-plate system was introduced,[19] explained: "I mean, we were lucky that both mom and dad had a car, and one had an even number and one had an odd number car-plate. So we could always drive one of the two cars." In personal examples, the last pioneers were somehow always lucky enough to avoid repression, its repercussions, or the little black notebooks they remember existing in Yugoslavia, taking us back to discursive strategies of *exceptionalism and singularity*.

Whatever the negative memories of Yugoslavia are, they are mostly constructed as second-hand memories or post-memories from previous generations, largely the parents of the last pioneers. Still, negative memories appear far more rarely than positive ones. Moreover, when negative memories surface, they undergo negotiation—even within the interview itself—through back-and-forth reflections, narrations, and re-narrations, often ending in confusion or uncertainty. These negotiations are strongest when discussing the official and unofficial histories of Yugoslavia. It is important to note that anticommunism and anti-Yugoslavism do not necessarily coincide, especially in Slovenia and Serbia, while the two positions remain strongly intertwined in Croatia. Yet remembering, re-remembering, and re-narrating the negative sides of Yugoslav history and the socialist period does not translate into support for the conflicts of the 1990s. The war was, as previously noted, unexpected and perceived as a top-down endeavor.

19 In 1979, during the global gas crisis, the government introduced the even-odd car plate system: on one day only cars with even plate numbers could drive; on the next, only those with odd numbers. Interestingly, Paris temporarily adopted the same system in 2016 to reduce pollution and traffic congestion.

Who Led the Wars?

The narratives of the war remain impersonal: it is always "they," "them," "someone," "a war happened," and so forth. The unanimous memory among all our last pioneers was that the war was impossible to imagine. Distancing themselves from both perpetrators and victims reflects a generational sentiment of having had no control over events at the time—and seemingly, not much has changed today. Yet when discussing wartime atrocities and the dangers and horrors brought by nationalism, the left-wing last pioneers acknowledge that some political repression in Yugoslavia may have been, in light of dissolution and war, to some extent justified. On the terrace of a hotel in Kragujevac, Bogdan remarks: "They [the Communist Party] at least kept some people in prison who belonged in prison, but still they also kept some who did not belong, though not as many. Now we are all in prison."

The war was neither chosen nor led by the last pioneers. The rise of nationalist politics was something they largely witnessed before they were even able to vote. In trying to fathom the history of Yugoslavia, they struggle to understand how their intimate memories relate to hegemonic discourses of hatred and repression, and how those memories shape their values today. Radmila, carrying the personal scars of ethnic conflict from her childhood in Kosovo and remaining loyal to a left-wing orientation that many would question within her party, summarizes: "Because if we are not different, then who is different?… There lies the answer to our question, which is a historical one. And it is our responsibility not to let our children be divided."

This atmosphere of open questions yet to be answered also creates opportunities for opposing narratives to be articulated in the political field, bringing new hope onto the horizon. If we understand that the "generational nostalgic sentiment … creates as it conserves" (Davis 2011, 450) political opportunities, the subversive spaces of dialogue between the various memory narratives of the last pioneers—as well as so-called Yugonostalgia—provide an open space for new realities and new potentialities; counter-memory creating "the political conditions for change" (Molden 2016, 130).

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5. (Post)Yugoslavism: No State, No Nation—Common Space, Common Identity

Abstract: This chapter conceptualizes Yugoslavism as a persistent identity rooted in shared generational experience rather than statehood or nationalism. Distinguishing it analytically from Yugonostalgia, the chapter identifies three forms of (post)Yugoslavism—culturalist, anti-neoliberal, and meta-national—each articulating belonging, critique, and political imagination in different ways. (Post)Yugoslavism is shown to provide continuity across rupture, enabling the last pioneers to articulate alternative visions of community, solidarity, and social justice beyond ethno-national frameworks. The chapter positions (post)Yugoslavism as a generational resource with enduring political relevance.

Keywords: (post) Yugoslavism; meta-national identity; generation; anti-neoliberalism; political imagination; belonging

History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.
—James Baldwin in Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016)

Once our last pioneers smilingly recounted the stories of their childhoods, and then the gloomier stories of their adolescences, there was always a spontaneous pause: a sip of coffee, the flare of a cigarette, a melancholic silence, or an awkward joke.[1] The shared sentiment of a generation helped make the interview a genuine space of co-created knowledge, gradually

1 This chapter was in part previously published as Popović 2023.

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bringing us into the present. The last pioneers believe that, as *children of socialism*, they were taught that a different world was possible—a world unlike the one they encountered in adulthood. They believe that a generational change in the political field is much needed, even if they remain skeptical about their own capacity to be that generation: the generation that changes everything.

Only after 2018, once the fieldwork was completed, did the last pioneers begin to assume more powerful and prominent positions within the political hierarchy, transforming their social movements into political parties and, in some cases, winning elections and taking over entire cities. Until then, they had stood firmly in the Gramscian spirit of "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," remaining active and fighting for causes they sometimes considered lost in advance. The decades of accelerated austerity during neoliberal capitalism and the rise of neonationalisms have certainly enhanced the appeal of nostalgia, as people find themselves "longing for an ordered clarity contrasting with the chaos or imprecision of our own times" (Lowenthal 1989, 30). In trying to understand how they make sense of their Yugonostalgia—and Yugonostalgia more broadly—embedded in their generational positionality and juxtaposed with their political positionalities, it became clear that two empiric phenomena stand before us. Interconnected yet fully distinct, Yugonostalgia and Yugoslavism both exist today.

The last pioneers do not deny the social realities of differences existing on the ground, such as linguistic diversity. Vito, who had earlier described how his Zagreb-born daughter picked up some *Serbian* words online, returned to the question of language: "Before the war, I had no clue [about ethno-nationality]. The only thing I was aware of was that in Serbia you say *bioskop*, and we say *kino*. But I was only aware that it was said differently from comic books." In Yugoslav society, linguistic diversity did not constitute the insurmountable barrier to common life that it became during the wars: when Zorana arrived in Belgrade as a refugee, her friends began teasing her years later because she still said *kino* instead of *bioskop*.

Across our conversations, (post)Yugoslavism emerged as an antinationalist (counter-)identity and a meta-national identity, exceeding static imaginaries of ethno-national belonging. Although Yugoslavism has existed in various forms since the nineteenth century, it is today largely forgotten as a historical artefact that withered with the dissolution of the socialist state; rarely taken up as an object of research, with some notable exceptions (Djokić 2003; Haug 2012; Ivešić 2021; Jezernik 2018; Malešević 2024; Markovina 2015). Understood as an identity possible only within a Yugoslav

state, Yugoslavism has been ostracized from the public space: from the constitutional prohibition of any possibility of Yugoslav reunification in Croatia (2010, Article 142);[2] to the renaming of streets and public spaces (Jouhanneau 2007; Radović 2013; Rihtman-Auguštin 2000); to the demolition or neglect of Yugoslav-era monuments (Buble et al. 2017; Horvatinčić 2015); and revisionism in history textbooks (Pavasović Trošt 2018; Stojanović 2010). Even the name of Yugoslavia has been replaced by "neutral" signifiers, sometimes referring to a wider or a narrower area than the precise (post) Yugoslav space: Southeastern Europe; the Western Balkans; the Region; or by introducing new idioms like Yugosphere, denoting a space of economic, cultural, military, and even criminal exchange beyond geographical or ethno-national borders (Judah 2009).

Brotherhood and unity—often dismissed as obsolete—still figures prominently in the narratives of the left-wing last pioneers. It is one of the first associations they make with Yugoslavia: an idea, even an ideal. In a shaded garden in Novi Sad, Una insists: "Those are ideas that were not only words which brainwashed us, but truly … I don't know. I truly felt it then." The idea of Yugoslavism is tied to their memories of not being aware of ethno-national identity, of positive interethnic relations, and of feeling at home across the (post)Yugoslav space. In this sense, (post)Yugoslavism emerges as an identitarian intervention in the (post)Yugoslav world, embedded in generational positionality.

To counter mainstream narratives of interethnic hatred, the last pioneers' memories take different forms. In Rijeka, David explains the continuity of his antinationalism: "I did not concern myself with which ethno-nationality, or of which origin I am. It was not important to me when I was a Yugoslav, so it's not important to me now." For Filip in Zagreb, this rejection of ethno-nationalism becomes a more explicit political statement: "Yugoslav Partisans, whatever ethno-nationality, fought against the same scum. And today when we are separated, today when there is no longer our country, I do not see any reason why we would again divide into a Serbian and a Croatian left." Regardless of their current ethno-national identification, the meaning attributed to the Yugoslavia of the 1980s and their childhoods remains relevant. Jože, an MP from the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), remains firm in rejecting retroactive ethno-national attributions: "But Bojan Križaj,[3] he was a Yugoslav. He wasn't a Slovene, or a Serb, or a Croat."

2 Ustav Republike Hrvatske, *Narodne novine* 85/2010.

3 Bojan Križaj was a highly popular alpine skier from Slovenia.

Certainly, the idea of Yugoslavism has been damaged by war. As we sit in her office in Zagreb—where she lives now, though originally from Slavonia—Dora, a member of an established left-wing political party, explains: "And now, the idea of Yugoslavism, it lost its emancipating potential in the public discourse. Can it again be filled with it? I don't know if it was too compromised here. But if it was compromised, then it is because of the Yugoslav People's Army, only because of that, and not because of anything else. That destroyed it." Marginalized, demonized, and reduced to a nostalgic sentiment rather than an ideological position: could (post)Yugoslavism become an identity of resistance in the (post)Yugoslav space?

Socialist Yugoslavism and the Concept of Home

Multiple versions of Yugoslavism existed from the early nineteenth century onward (Malešević 2024), grounded in cultural and linguistic proximity as well as in the anti-colonial and emancipatory struggles of the South Slav peoples against the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Before the Second World War, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia adopted a unitary approach to Yugoslavism, framing it as a supranational idea and a federal model for the state.

Once socialist Yugoslavia was established, the Party's approach to the so-called national question shifted. Distancing itself from the repressive unitarism of monarchist Yugoslavia, the League of Communists promoted a common Yugoslav culture without Yugoslav nationalism, while having to "tread a fine balance between the two great 'dangers' to the building of a Yugoslav socialist community: 'national particularism' and 'bureaucratic centralism'" (Haug 2012, 161). The 1974 Constitution appeared to return to a more particularist approach, not least through the partial abandonment of the idea of a common Yugoslav nation. But a unitary Yugoslav nation—understood in the sense of modern European nation-states—was never the Party's aim (Malešević 2024).

Kardelj's 1957 work *The Development of the Slovenian National Question* made this explicit: Yugoslavism derived from socialist interests, and no new nations could be created in Yugoslavia. At the Seventh Congress of the League of Communists in 1964, Tito declared: "The development of a common Yugoslav culture can be understood as a free and wide flourishing of the national cultures of all Yugoslav peoples and nationalities, united by unique interests, a unique socialist state system, and in that way, the unique basic and important content of its cultural creation" (Matvejević

2003, 134). The development of a common Yugoslav culture and identity was thus conceived as a revolutionary, anti-colonial, and socialist project, embedded in the struggle against particularisms and nationalisms in the tradition of socialist internationalism.

Despite ambiguities and shifts within the Party, the number of people identifying as Yugoslavs rose in the 1980s even if it remained statistically modest: in the 1981 census, more than 1,200,000 people (5.5% of the population) declared themselves Yugoslavs, compared to only 200,000 people in 1971, the first year the option was available (Dević 2016, 30–31; Woodward 1995, 28). A 1987 survey in Zagreb and Belgrade showed even higher identification among youth: "more than 16 per cent of the population aged below thirty declared themselves Yugoslavs, while close to 40 per cent stated that 'Yugoslav identification would be preferable to them'" (Flere 1988, 440). This picture is incomplete, as many people did not declare any ethno-national identity at all (Gordy 1999). Recognizing that Yugoslavism was on the rise—especially among the parents of the last pioneers—would challenge ethno-centric explanations of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the Yugoslav wars, as well as the ethno-nationalist political projects of the (post) Yugoslav states. As such, it has been vigorously avoided.

Tanja Petrović (2007) has already noted that Yugonostalgia does not entail a demand for the reunification of the Yugoslav state, but more often a longing for lost spatial identities. These "mental maps" (Petrović 2007) of the last pioneers, or "medial landscapes" (Pogačar 2011), persist through cultural circulations within the (post)Yugoslav space, creating what Pogačar calls the *Yu*niverse (Pogačar 2011). (Post)Yugoslavism, embedded in the generational positionality of the last pioneers, is situated in reflections on the Adriatic Sea and the narrative of *home*, regardless of political positionality, country of origin or residence, or ethno-national identity. Igor, the center-liberal MP in Slovenia, originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, puts it succinctly: "It is my space where I can be at home … I don't feel like a stranger."

Among the spatial images that come to mind when our last pioneers are asked about their associations with Yugoslavia, the most common trope—above all—is the Adriatic Sea, both as memory and as present. Once accessible to (almost) everyone through organized summer vacation houses provided to blue-collar workers, pioneers, and the middle classes, it remains today a place of yearning for most (post)Yugoslavs. For Slovenia and Croatia, the Adriatic is also a contemporary site of contestation: the border dispute over the Bay of Piran continues despite the 2017 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. In a café in Zagreb, next door to a wedding rehearsal, Andrija, an HDZ member from Zagorje, tells me a joke: "You ask,

"Whose bay is it?" In our circles, we always make fun of it, so we say "Serbian." Why Serbian? Well, Kostić[4] is the owner of the land on the Croatian side and Kostić is the owner of the land on the Slovenian side. In between is just the sea." Depicting the irony of the parallel processes of obtaining statehood, especially through the war, and losing that sovereignty through the political economy of free market privatizations, the joke succinctly captures the last pioneers' reflections on the present.

(Post)Yugoslavia remains a space that is "not a simple reintegration or restoration, but a reconfiguration of what had existed before" (Baker 2015, 124). If we can be nostalgic only for what we have irretrievably lost, how can we be nostalgic for what we still have today? Across the (post)Yugoslav space, nuances emerge: some describe Zagreb as closer to Vienna than to the rest of Yugoslavia, yet all express irritation—and often a sense of injustice—when they must wait at borders, cross borders, show passports, or have them stamped. Borders are experienced as a nuisance and an unnecessary burden. Beyond them, the last pioneers recognize a shared (post) Yugoslav economic and cultural space. The common market and economic cooperation—products of capitalism but also of emotional consumer attachment to Yugoslav brands—are seen as both necessary and inevitable.

Yet within this common space, distance also appears. Kosovo is largely absent from the interviewees' narratives—not only in terms of linguistic and cultural issues and memories but also in memory. It was the least visited part of Yugoslavia, rarely appears in recollections, and is often excluded from meaning-making about Yugoslav history.[5] When it does appear, it is as the poorest region, through references to the late 1990s conflict and NATO bombing, or, among a few right-wing interviewees in Serbia, as a contemporary political issue. Overall, Kosovo is excluded from reflections on the (post)Yugoslav space. Linguistic difference and cultural separation most certainly play a role, as several interviewees suggested; yet the social distance observed among the last pioneers indicates that for the Yugoslav, the Kosovo Albanian represents the Other.

If we were to measure perceived distance, the next on the list for interviewees from Croatia and Serbia would be Slovenia: remarks frequently note

4 Miodrag Kostić (1959–2024), a Serbian businessman, was the owner of Istrian Hotels, part of his MK Group, which bought the Skiper Resort in Savudrija, Croatia, but also the Kempinski Hotel in Portorož, Slovenia (including shares in the Portorož Airport and Portorož Bay). This is how Kostić acquired ownership over the most valuable property on both sides of the Bay of Piran.

5 Unfortunately, despite considerable effort, the author was unable to include political actors from the Albanian minority among the interviewees in the three researched states. The same holds for the Roma minority.

that Slovenia was "always something different," that it is the place where they feel least at home today, or that the linguistic difference is greatest. Yet while Kosovo feels excluded, Slovenia remains included—albeit more distantly—within the (post)Yugoslav space. North Macedonia and Montenegro follow, appearing only rarely in the narratives. For the last pioneers in the three countries researched, the (post)Yugoslav space effectively means Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and—more ambiguously—Slovenia, with Montenegro and North Macedonia almost as an addendum.

Nevertheless, regardless of how salient particular former republics appear in their narratives, none of them are percepted as *foreign countries*. Where linguistic proximity is stronger, the feeling of being at home follows. The spatial dimension of *home* is most often articulated when interviewees are asked about the cultural space and whether they connect their memories to the present. Strahinja, originally from central Belgrade and a member of parliament from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), identifies as right wing, views the loss of Yugoslavia as Serbia's greatest loss, and emphasizes the importance of Kosovo (or "Kosovo and Metohija," as he calls it) for Serbian national identity. Yet he does not shy away from a shared Yugoslav identity: "And we are so similar that even if we wanted to be different, we wouldn't be able to be."

Being abroad further strengthens this Yugoslav identity. Political actors participating in European and international organizations consistently highlight the camaraderie of *the Yugoslav group*, where generational positionality once again supersedes political positionality, opening easier and more direct channels of communication—even if not necessarily shared political initiatives.

(Post)Yugoslavism does not necessarily function as resistance to anticommunist mainstream discourses; rather, it persists as an antinationalist generational identity, adaptable to the contemporary global context of Europeanization and neoliberal economic policies. While Yugonostalgia is understood here as a practice—carrying memories of a past home into the present—(post)Yugoslavism as an identity manifests in three main forms: culturalist, anti-neoliberal, and meta-national.

Culturalist Yugoslavism

When discussing Yugoslavism and identity, the narrative consistently shifts toward an undefined "we." When the generational "we-sense" (Corsten 1999) moves beyond ethno-national identity and becomes Yugoslav, it often

conceals Balkanism (Todorova 2009)—the auto-orientalizing gaze—and appears most prominently in the memory narratives of center-liberal last pioneers. Within frameworks invoking the Ottoman legacy or *Balkan mentality*, Slovenes are cast as *the West*. Even if, within certain "mental maps," a right-wing last pioneer in Slovenia may imagine the Slovenian cultural space as closer to Tirol or Bavaria, for the majority it remains part of a shared Yugoslav space.

The Other—*the East*, or in this case the Balkans—is understood, as Borna explains, as "an exclusively cultural concept that implies backwardness, narrow-mindedness, rigidity." The so-called *socialist mentality*, as part of a shared culture, heritage, and history, is described by our, mostly center liberal, last pioneers as "irrational," "anti-intellectual," "lazy," "lacking in responsibility," "corrupted." Intertwined with earlier sentiments of helplessness, Luka concludes irreverently: "The political elites in the whole of the Balkans are mentally retarded, including me."

The notion that *the others have it better* recurs across the region: for Slovenes, Croats are more united and Serbs braver; for Croats, Slovenes are more organized and Serbs braver; for Serbs, Slovenes are "Western" and Croats more united. In this way, culturalist Yugoslavism embraces notions of mentality and foregrounds memory narratives that support the European perspectives and Western-centrism of socialist Yugoslavia.

Culturalist Yugoslavism appears as a shared identity grounded in linguistic proximity, shared history, and shared cultural codes—often summarized as "mentality." It holds that the (post)Yugoslav space should join the European Union, aiming to "catch up" with the Western "civilized" world. It embraces capitalism, does not shy away from anticommunism, and remains politically ambiguous. As such, it often extends across the political spectrum.

Radmila and Andrija, for instance, come from political parties, in Croatia and Serbia that led the ethno-nationalist wars of the 1990s. Today, however, they call for recognizing similarities rather than differences between those same communities. Radmila insists: "Let everyone protect their national identity, they have it, those are old nations, nobody there is an improvised nation … But [we need] to reduce these differences that were imposed and to recognize our common goal." Andrija concurs: "we are closer between ourselves than we are with Austrians or Hungarians."

The generational identity formed through a Yugoslav childhood and Yugoslav socialization most often comes to the fore. Even when he is otherwise strongly critical of Yugoslavia, Saša holds firmly to his generational positionality:

> There must be an attachment … if it is Yugoslavism, call it whatever you like, I don't care, some attachment exists. If I need to explain something to someone from my generation, let's say from Niš, I will say *Vozi Miško* [Drive, Miško!][6] and they will immediately understand what I am talking about. Of course, there is a certain dose of common identity that we cannot run away from, nor should we.

This identity does not require formal self-identification in a census, nor everyday performative declarations. It gathers a mishmash of a variety of identity outlooks and lends a multilayered character to life narratives, making it the form of Yugoslavism shared by almost all of our last pioneers.

Center-liberals welcome a common market—including the free movement of capital and people—together with the right wing. Future open borders are seen as either inevitable or necessary. David explains: "As a matter of fact, Serbia is the biggest market for Croatia and the other way round." Una agrees, even if she sees it as an unavoidable evil: "The economic space of Yugoslavia certainly exists; it is tragic, as everywhere in capitalism." The inevitability of a common space is accepted as normality, even among the far right. This shared generational knowledge—of having something in common as a Yugoslav political generation—persists among the last pioneers. Strahinja elaborates, in a way that might seem at odds with his right-wing positionality: "We speak the same language, more or less have the same problems, we more or less live the same. Now whether the average salary in Zagreb is twenty Euros more than in Sarajevo, and whether in Belgrade it is twenty Euros more than in Skopje, more or less that is, our problems are similar. Similar culture, similar heritage, similar history."

Only one of our last pioneers disagreed. Samid, who grew up in Sandžak and is now an MP for a Bosniak minority party in Serbia, believes strongly that the cultural space has dissipated along the lines of the new states: "Today, not a single high school student in Serbia reads [the great Croatian writer Miroslav] Krleža. And you cannot imagine Yugoslav society without Krleža." One could indeed debate whether Krleža or Lepa Brena is more constitutive of Yugoslav culture. Along those lines, an important reflection came from the left-wing spectrum: a class-based perspective. In Split, Antonio observes:

6 A line from the 1980 movie *Ko to tamo peva* (Who's Singing Over There), directed by Slobodan Šijan with a screenplay by Dušan Kovačević. The film has since achieved cult status, and numerous quotes from it have entered everyday idiomatic usage in the Serbo-Croatian language.

> It functions at the level of elitist individuals. I don't think we are elitist with the money we have, but we simply are. The fact that we go to Krokodil,[7] it is a select group of people, we go to Borka's,[8] or in Sarajevo I know columnists and writers. It is a select group of people. There are many liberals, some are even nationalists. Of course, decent nationalists, there are leftists.... There is everything.... These groups were never dominant.... People are still primarily nationalists.

The idea of "Yugoslavism for the elites" appears from multiple perspectives, often juxtaposed with the idea of ethno-nationalist masses and used to explore what remains of the Yugoslav idea once communism and its revolutionary ethos are removed. A key example is the Declaration on the Common Language (Jezici i nacionalizmi 2017), adopted by intellectuals and activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia as part of the project "Languages and Nationalisms". The Declaration asserts that all four countries share a single language with four variants, opposing linguistic segregation and discrimination, advocating the free use of all variants, and calling for an end to unnecessary bureaucratic translations. While some criticized the Declaration as politically timid, others approached it from a class perspective, arguing that such initiatives remain confined to a small, closed circle.

Jakov, a member of parliament from the established left in Croatia, supports the view that language is not the central issue: "As the party secretary said,... it is not important whether you say *kruh* or *hleb*[9]—What's important is that there is enough of it. It is not important if it's *fabrika* or *tvornica*[10]—What's important is that it is being built. It was the 1960s [when he said it], but those are the issues that are present even today."

However, antinationalist elites are central to culturalist Yugoslavism, insisting that the war was "a conflict between nationalisms and not between nations" (Jansen 2005, 97). Their resistance often took intimate, everyday forms: buying books on Yugoslavism, identifying as Yugoslav in the census, falling in love with other (post)Yugoslav ethno-nationalities, and openly resisting nationalist teachers in high school, or engaging in antinationalist activism. For many left-wing and liberal activists among the last pioneers,

7 Krokodil (http://www.krokodil.rs/) is a literary festival that takes place in Belgrade on a yearly basis, gathering (post)Yugoslav writers, poets and various artists.

8 Borka Pavićević (1947–2019) was an established playwright and activist, the founder of the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade.

9 Two ways of saying "bread" in Croatian (*kruh*) and Serbian (*hleb*) today.

10 Two ways of saying "factory" in Serbian (*fabrika*) and in Croatian (*tvornica*) today.

antinationalism was their first ideological stance—and for liberals, it remains the dominant one.

Culturalist Yugoslavism is not inherently Yugonostalgic. It aligns comfortably with neoliberal capitalism and Europeanization. What distinguishes it from anti-neoliberal and meta-national Yugoslavisms is its acceptance of the status quo and its accommodation of existing geopolitical realities.

Anti-Neoliberal Yugoslavism

The European Union rarely appeared in the narratives of the last pioneers. When it did, it was most often approached with skepticism—toward both the benefits of membership and the Union's long-term viability. Saša, a committed believer in the established left and social democracy who rose to the highest ranks of his party in Croatia, imagines the EU as the place where "we meet again": "I mean, it's like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton: they separated, then tried again, and nothing worked. So we should divorce nicely and be friends. At the end of the day, we all now enter a much bigger marriage, and that is the European Union."

Among his peers on the left, skepticism is even stronger. Fabijan bleakly predicts that "we will be united in the EU, a worse federation and a worse community than the one we were in." Mario, another party member living on the Istrian coast; is more direct. On a cloudy, windy day in Istria, he reflects on Croatia's 2013 accession: "Entering the EU has brought us only barbed wire on the borders." In the narratives of the last pioneers, the EU appears more as an imposed entity than a chosen one, contrasted with socialist Yugoslavia—a project the peoples of Yugoslavia fought for and built. Once again, helplessness and distance color their reflections: even if an EU-Yugoslavia emerges, it will not be *ours*.

The roots of this disappointment lie in the so-called transition processes. When everything was supposed to improve, privatization continued to erode the social fabric of (post)Yugoslav societies. Its effects were felt everywhere. Many last pioneers witnessed their families' socio-economic status decline; even in Slovenia, a left-wing party member recalls his single mother losing her job. Similar stories recur across the region. Tanja, a trade-union member in central Serbia, concludes that the 2000s brought only disappointment: "And then you need a couple of years to understand that nothing changed, except that we stopped fighting."

This negative perception of the present is widely shared across all three countries, across political positions, professions, and class backgrounds. The

awakening to (post)Yugoslav reality confirmed for many that "nationalism was more an instrument than a cause" (Baker 2015, 129) of the Yugoslav wars, as disappointment with the present opened up space for new readings of the Yugoslav past. David, a local political party member from Istria, summarizes the sentiment of the whole generation: "Nobody asked us if we want capitalism or we don't, but we got it and that's it."

This sentiment travels across the political spectrum. Andrija, our "unusual" HDZ member, concludes: "What was burned down by war in this region is just a drop in the ocean in comparison to what was burned down by transformation and privatization"—despite belonging to a party partly responsible for those very processes. In Zagreb's café Kino Europa, Filip reflects on his Yugoslav childhood and the hardships caused by his mother's career, contrasting past and present emigration: "Today it's not [simple] anymore.... back then...Dad goes to work in Germany, and he sends money to Mom and the kids, to make it easier for us. No, today Dad goes *with* Mom, the kids, and the two dogs. They sit down in his car and they [all] go—if you have a car. Isn't that proof that today is worse than it was then?"

Resentment toward privatization is not confined to Croatia. In Serbia, particularly in the heavily affected region of Sandžak, Samid recalls:

> Big strikes in the streets.... [Novi] Pazar, for example, is a town where the most extreme strikes happened.... One worker, I think in the Raška textile factory, cut off his own finger and swallowed it. Another one hammered himself to the wall.... I remember people were on strike for months; hunger strikes; rigid strikes. And that is what marked the period after 2000, maybe until 2005 or 2006, when they lost all hope, when all those bad privatizations happened. That comprehensive theft of all those resources which gave some degree of hope to people, that maybe a glimpse of the normal life they had in the 1970s and 1980s would come back.

What Štiks and Horvat describe as "general impoverishment, huge public and private indebtedness facilitated by a flow of foreign credit, widespread deindustrialisation, social degradation, depopulation through diminished life expectancy and emigration, and general unemployment" (2015), the last pioneers articulate as occupation, colonialism, loss of sovereignty, and the imposition of a neoliberal ideology. The negative present of the (post) Yugoslav space is reflected in economic decline; the rise of materialist and consumerist culture; exploitation and misery as social norms; and the transformation of populations into a cheap labor force. These developments occurred across all three countries.

Our last pioneers frequently remark on the lack of social mobility today, in stark contrast to socialist Yugoslavia, and often note that anything good and positive is a legacy of the socialist period. Left-wing last pioneers interpret the transition as a form of subordination to neoliberal ideology and global capital: "We had the German army, which is the same thing today, only [they appear in the form of] German capital. Today they do not come on their tanks, but with their banks and their companies," concludes Filip. David summarizes the generational shift as follows: "We traded brotherhood and unity for capital."

The once accessible and shared Yugoslav identity has become a commodified Yugonostalgic product, visible in symbols across the (post)Yugoslav space (see figure 5.1), while the present is associated with high prices and low quality. The last pioneers believe that the promises made during Yugoslavia's dissolution—of future prosperity in independent ethno-national states freed from communism and Serbian imperialism—were broken, especially in Croatia. A sense of collective defeat and instability characterizes their understanding of the present.

That sense of defeat translates into anti-neoliberal Yugoslavism through the (remembered) idea of Yugoslav unity, which once made economic progress and, at minimum, political autonomy possible. In contrast to the culturalist Yugoslavism on which it builds, anti-neoliberal Yugoslavism rejects the neoliberal present and the imposition of geopolitical circumstances. It brings together both left-wing and right-wing last pioneers. Supported by memory narratives of Yugoslav stability and economic progress within a social(ist) state, even nationalist political movements recognized the need for regional cooperation. One example is the far-right *Dveri* from Serbia. Explaining their (post)Yugoslav cooperation with populist movement in Croatia, *Živi zid*, Stevan notes: "We invited him [*Živi zid*'s representative] as an opponent of neoliberalism, [and] capitalism, [as one] who understands what the EU did to the Croatian economy."

Right-wing last pioneers often gravitate toward culturalist and anti-neoliberal Yugoslavism, though this occurs only in Slovenia and Serbia. As noted earlier, SDS member Janez did not exclude the possibility of a regional confederation, reiterating that their stance is anticommunist rather than anti-Yugoslav, joking that "the only problem is that the Croats are in between the Slovenes and the Serbs."

The curious case of COVID-19 vaccination in Serbia opened questions of spatiality for the right (CNN 2021). In early 2021, Serbia used its geopolitical position to procure vaccines from across the world, including Russia and China, enabling one of the fastest vaccination campaigns in the region and



Figure 5.1. Kafana Jugoslavija in Kragujevac, Serbia: "The best quality and the cheapest, just like in the good old times," author's archive, 2017.

countering a strong anti-vaccine movement. Most strikingly, the Serbian government opened vaccination to foreigners, especially those from *the region*. Thousands of people from neighboring (post)Yugoslav countries ultimately traveled to Serbia to receive their vaccines. The government framed this both as a humanitarian gesture and as a recognition of spatial reality: in a global pandemic, with so many professional and private

connections across the (post)Yugoslav space, it would be impossible to fight the virus without sharing immunization efforts. Whatever the political motivations behind this move, it nonetheless revealed a gesture of solidarity and an understanding of the (post)Yugoslav space that transcended national borders—even on the political right.

The shift in the global political framework has shaped this transformation within right-wing ideologies in the (post)Yugoslav space; its consequences will only become visible with the generational turnover among political elites. Still, in Croatia, the rejection of Yugoslavism—in all its forms—remained palpable across the entire political spectrum.

Meta-National Yugoslavism

With a few exceptions, culturalist Yugoslavism brings together centrist-liberal and right-wing last pioneers, while anti-neoliberal Yugoslavism unites left-wing and right-wing ones; both are marked by a sense of hopelessness. By contrast, meta-national Yugoslavism, the only hopeful form, appears exclusively on the left wing of the political spectrum.

Meta-national Yugoslavism is grounded in a progressive political vision that moves beyond culturalist understandings and political-economic unions. It preserves the continuity of Yugoslavism's socialist-era meaning as well as its cosmopolitan and internationalist spirit. Looking to the past, it constructs a vision for the future. It is not reflected in census numbers.[11] Antonio considers his Yugoslavism essential to his left-wing political positionality. Although he holds citizenship in both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, he treats the census as a strategic political tool: "Well, I have self-identified since 1991 as a Croat, from the first census. In the same way, I feel I am a Yugoslav, but I do not think this is something incompatible; on the contrary. I think they fit together. At the last census in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I declared as a Yugoslav, so that there would be less of those ethno-nationally declared."

11 For example, in Serbia there were 27,143 individuals identifying as Yugoslavs in the 2022 census; this represents an increase compared to the 2011 census, when 23,303 people declared themselves Yugoslavs (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023, available at https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020102?languageCode=en-US). In Croatia—the (post)Yugoslav republic with the lowest number of Yugoslav identifiers—176 people declared themselves Yugoslavs, in 2001, 331 in 2011 (Jović 2017, 231), and 942 in 2021: a notable rise, yet still within the range of extremely marginal numbers.

Hopeful Yugoslavs do not necessarily self-identify as Yugoslavs in censuses, yet Yugoslavism remains part of their identity—fragmented, fractured, and embedded in memory narratives that involve "coming to term with our 'routes'" (Hall and du Gay 1995, 4). For some, it reflects family heritage. As Ivo, a left-wing party member in Slovenia, explains: "I mean I felt Yugoslav, and Dalmatian, and Slovene, but because I was more attached to mom, I felt Croatian more. It is the same today." The layering that socialist Yugoslavism enabled (Malešević 2024) made it impossible for Yugoslavism to develop into nationalism, while simultaneously providing a pathway for it to survive the end of the Yugoslav state as a layered meta-national identity.

Fluctuating, dynamic, and multidirectional—much like their memories—Yugoslav identity provides a sense of (dis)continuity in their lives. Miro, an MP in Croatia, explains: "Until the 1990s, I considered myself a Yugoslav, but with the dissolution, with the introduction of nationality … I was forced to become a Serb. I didn't want it; I simply had to become a Serb." The impossibility of this choice subsequently shaped the political activisms and political trajectories of many of our last pioneers. For those who suddenly became ethno-national minorities, the assigned identities became the pillars of their political identities.

When asked whether a new Yugoslavia might be possible, the last pioneers invariably answer in the negative. At most, such a possibility could arise—under unforeseen circumstances—far in the future. Their doubts stem from the bitter aftertaste of dissolution, war trauma, and what they describe as "bad experiences," "fear," or "reprisal." Some believe foreign powers would oppose such a development; others doubt that current political elites or populations possess *the maturity required* for Yugoslavia, as Kenan in Ljubljana puts it: "Just, it's a question, who is capable of doing it? So, it's impossible [laughter]." As political actors and as citizens, our last pioneers continue to hold on to a sense of helplessness. Their hope does not lie in the prospect of a new state, but in the continuity of their identity and the possibility of new futures. Transgressing current political imaginaries of the nation-state—and without demanding a new one—left-wing internationalism naturally gravitates toward supranational projects. As Una reflects:

> And now, call it Yugoslavia or something different, or some Balkan alliance or whatever. So, the idea to create a community, a political community, which will not be made on the basis and on the classical model of a nation-state, for me, that is the best that can be thought of, in terms of which direction to go with a progressive, political idea.

Yugoslavia may not have been a completed project in the narratives of the last pioneers—its disintegration ensured that—but it remained a political idea, even if ultimately unfulfilled. The Yugoslav state is often the only state to which our left-wing last pioneers feel an intimate attachment. For Anka in Zagreb, this means: "I have a sense of pride.... I have what Croats have toward Croatia. I have it toward Yugoslavia." Klemen from Maribor characterizes it this way: "For me that is love—Yugoslavia [is love]." These children of solidarity, our last pioneers, believe that Yugoslav identity provides an important layer, a significant puzzle piece of their intimate identity mosaic. Yugoslavism emerges as a supra-national layer compatible with other ethno-national identities—what Gal Kirn defines as "a common multiethnic space predicated on anti-nationalism" (2014, 326). Andrew Wachtel and Igor Štiks complement this by noting that in socialist Yugoslavia, Yugoslav identity took the form of "civic pluri-nationalism" (2019, 55).

Vuk, a Croatian MP who chose his words carefully throughout our interview, elaborates: "I remember it [Yugoslavia] ... in a theoretical, scientific way, a completely neutral position. In terms of growing up, it's childhood emotions. In a national sense, I think Yugoslavism is the natural finalization of a nation-state." From this perspective, Yugoslavia appears as a trope of something that has not yet happened but may still lie ahead. Dora extends this though: "Yugoslavism became some sort of excommunication, or nomadism ... but it is like an unnatural state, a bit disturbed." Yugoslavism thus crosses the borders of the newly established (post)Yugoslav states without creating its own: not those promised by a new supranational organization or another (multi)nation-state, and beyond those formed through temporal movement—borders that have already existed. It does not seek to connect "nations": it already presupposes a community, in both past and present, operating on a meta-level.

Meta-national Yugoslavism is anchored in memories of the region's post-colonial legacies; pan-Slavic movements; the Second World War; the Holocaust; the global antifascist struggle and socialist revolution; the concept of brotherhood and unity; and the globalized capitalist societies of the twentieth century. The first monarchist Yugoslavia, however, is almost never mentioned. These silences are themselves generative: they help constitute a generational location not only through shared events and data but through what Mannheim calls a "similarly 'stratified' consciousness" (2011, 95). Through these entanglements, Yugonostalgia emerges, and meta-national Yugoslavism approaches it. Together, they function as strategies for resolving cognitive dissonances and as interventions into mainstream (post)

Yugoslav discourses, opening space for new political dialogues, alliances, and solidarities.

To sum up, (post)Yugoslavism persists in the (post)Yugoslav space, encompassing spatial and cultural dimensions while opening the horizon for a political one. While Yugonostalgia is seen as both enabling and obstructing creativity in present and future political struggles, (post)Yugoslavism is understood as a crucial element in reimagining political space today. Memories of interethnic coexistence, the quality of everyday life, social mobility, and belief in the socialist paradigm are deemed dangerous by hegemonic ethno-nationalisms precisely because they resist ethno-national borders and the unquestioned logic of neoliberal austerity. These memory narratives remind us that it is not only nations that remember: mnemonic communities range from families and friends to former—and even future—nations, as well as communities beyond the imaginary of nations.

Structured as an antinationalist identity, (post)Yugoslavism in the (post) Yugoslav space encourages transnational memory narratives and fosters Yugoslav political solidarity across parties and movements. Fluctuating, dynamic, and multidirectional—much like memory itself—(post)Yugoslavism opens new possibilities for coexistence and solidarity as "noeuds de mémoire," exceeding territorial and identitarian reductions (Rothberg 2010). Summarized as "no state, no nation; one space, one identity," (post) Yugoslavism as a meta-national identity surpasses static ethno-national imaginaries through the political reflections of the last pioneers—leaving them, and all other Yugoslavs, with hope.

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6. The Return of Hope: Discursive Strategies, Cognitive Dissonances, and the Future of Yugonostalgia

Abstract: The final chapter analyzes Yugonostalgia as a set of practices rather than a fixed sentiment, identifying it as a discursive strategy, a container for cognitive dissonance, and a repertoire of resistance. It shows how Yugonostalgia enables political actors to negotiate contradictions between lived experience and dominant revisionist narratives while opening spaces for critique, solidarity, and future-oriented hope. Far from being politically disabling, Yugonostalgia is presented as a dynamic resource that transforms memory into action and sustains alternative political imaginaries in the (post)Yugoslav present.

Keywords: Yugonostalgia; discourse; resistance; cognitive dissonance; hope; political imaginaries

Studies of nostalgia often label almost *any* remembering of the socialist past as nostalgic, without discrimination or careful attention to the content of the memory narratives. In 2016, Ekaterina Kalinina offered a comprehensive overview of such approaches—both popular and academic—showing that "prejudices lie at the core of nostalgia attributions, which are used to denigrate some while at the same time strengthening the privileged position of dominant groups," and that "nostalgia can and usually does become a powerful tool for disempowering others" (2016, 9).

As nostalgia expanded from homesickness into temporal longing—"from spatial dislocation to temporal dislocation" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 922)—Yugonostalgia became an easy label to simply reject any debate about the past. The social sciences have struggled to keep pace with the empirical breadth of the phenomenon: either by relegating nostalgia to

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banality and dismissing it as useless, or by assigning it to the political Other, including populist propaganda. Despite these rejections, recent psychological research has established nostalgia as a positive phenomenon. More prominent in times of crisis (Davis 1979), nostalgia is not only a response to rupture but also a relational phenomenon of the present. With its capacity to be both interpretive (Davis 1979) and reflective (Davis 1979; Boym 2001), nostalgia can emerge through critical thinking and work to debunk historical myths and false interpretations of the past. For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia's ability to connect with the social and move beyond the individual—unlike melancholia—marks it as a social phenomenon (2001). There are, of course, as many nostalgias as there are its forms, practices, and appearances. Yet to understand its political significance, we must heed Nadkarni and Shevchenko's warning that "[a]ny analysis of post-socialist nostalgia must thus guard against two temptations: reading politics into nostalgia (that is, assuming inherent political meaning or implications to specific nostalgic practices) and reading nostalgia into politics (assuming that every reference to the past is indeed a nostalgic one)" (2004, 490). Whether understood as "the department of the heart" (Ugrešić 2008, 193), a shared cultural and emotional space (Petrov 2016), or as emancipatory (Buden 2012; Petrović 2012; Velikonja 2010Velikonja 2010; Buden 2012; Petrović 2012), Yugonostalgia is present and acquires distinct features among the generation of the last pioneers.

The term Yugonostalgia remains impossible to define precisely, as it is as multiple as the actors who use it. It would be unfeasible to elaborate all its possible—and impossible—meanings within this book. Yugonostalgia functions as a secret memory box from which individuals select their preferred memories, values, and attitudes according to their politics; or, as Samid from Novi Pazar puts it, "a well from which everyone takes water when they need it."

Today, Yugonostalgia encompasses a wide range of meanings: intimate recollections of life in socialist Yugoslavia; an emotion of longing for a lost time and space; a commercialized marketing strategy for retro goods and services; any positive reference to the socialist Yugoslav past, especially in political and social contexts; and a strategy of resistance to the negative present and insecure future of the (post)Yugoslav space (Popović 2025b). It is not always an expression of adherence to (post)Yugoslavism, nor is it necessarily an antinationalist act of resistance (Jansen 2005, 222–225). Many argue that it cannot generate a political movement (Horvat and Štiks 2015), or even that it is impossible to construct Yugonostalgia as a scientific object (Breznik and Močnik 2022).

In public discourse, the dominant reading of Yugonostalgia is negative: it is portrayed as banal, retrograde, or simply useless—an emotion of older generations mourning the past without a clear political direction. Yet the generational perspective of our last pioneers—even when they depart from mainstream readings of Yugonostalgia—reveals specific potentialities and fresh insights. The Yugonostalgia of the last pioneers appears as an everyday memory practice, transcending national borders and emanating from Yugoslav identity itself. Its multidirectional, multilayered, multivocal, and multi-sited character (De Cesari and Rigney 2014) actively challenges boundaries imposed by ethno-nationalism, nation-states, and liberal dismissals of socialist heritage as merely retrograde.

Multiple elaborations of the content of Yugonostalgia appear in scholarly work. Monika Palmberger shows how, for the "Last Yugoslavs" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugonostalgia can mirror "the economic insecurities, the loss of a social network, together with the loss of a life prospect" (2016, 175). Tanja Petrović argues that "positive memories of life and work in socialism are dismissed as nostalgia, while the memories of those who testify about crimes and violence conducted by the communist authorities prevail in media discourses and are taken as objective testimonies with the legitimacy of historiographical sources" (2016, 509). Stef Jansen conceptualizes Yugonostalgia as a generational (focused on the parents of the last pioneers) and class phenomenon, characterizing it as individualistic, cultural, and apolitical (2005). For Aleksandar Bošković, Yugonostalgia constitutes a critical intervention in postsocialist memory politics and in the politics of emancipation (2013).

While (post)Yugoslavism appears as a generational identity in its culturalist, anti-neoliberal, and meta-national forms, Yugonostalgia—primarily embedded in political positionality—emerges in three forms: as a discursive strategy; as an intimate container for cognitive dissonances; and as a set of resistance strategies that transform political imaginaries.

There is indeed a multiplicity of meanings behind so-called nostalgic reflections and acts, each engendering methodological and ideological confusions. Yugonostalgia appears as a "memory [that] emerges from unexpected, multidirectional encounters—encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present, to be sure, but also between different agents or catalysts" (Rothberg 2010, 9). Born in intimate spaces, it resolves cognitive dissonances between individual memory narratives and revisionist public discourses through the lens of generational positionality. It is political positionality, however, that enables Yugonostalgia to transform into a political and collective phenomenon.

A Discursive Strategy

The left-wing last pioneers argue that Yugonostalgia functions as a *catch-phrase* deployed by political opponents, obscuring the far richer content that lies beyond everyday affective expressions. For them, insisting on *discussing Yugoslavia beyond Yugonostalgia* is the central task. And indeed, the mainstream discursive strategy of labeling any (post)Yugoslav memory narrative or left-wing ideologies as nostalgic continues the hegemonic logic in which "an ideological 'other,' communism, has replaced the geographical/cultural 'other' of the Orient" (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 4).

The banalization and demonization of Yugonostalgia—and of any reference to Yugoslavia—results from the ideological work of political elites since the country's dissolution. Several hours into our conversation on a hot summer day in Novi Sad, Jovan explains that any space for reflecting on the Yugoslav past is perceived as dangerous by current political elites: "The potential danger for today's ruling class in all the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, from Macedonia to Slovenia … is the breakdown of their project through which they got rich in the last twenty-five years." Yugonostalgic memory narratives thus appear as counter-narratives that threaten nation-building discourses and the ideological regime changes introduced since the 1990s.

Circulating across the (post)Yugoslav space, historical revisionisms grounded in anticommunism and, to a lesser extent, anti-Yugoslavism create new spaces of dialogue among right-wing actors. At the same time, the disappearance of an institutional Yugoslav framework in the form of a state did not erase Yugoslav identity, Yugoslavism, or Yugoslavs—nor did it halt the movement of Yugonostalgic and Yugoslav communities. Yet almost no one wishes to be labeled Yugonostalgic. Few adopt the term; many question whether they can even *be* nostalgic, given the generation to which they belong. They internalize the anti-Yugonostalgic mainstream discourse while simultaneously seeking to reassign meaning to the term, often avoiding it altogether.

Peter, a left-wing party member in Slovenia and antifascist activist resisting revisionist nation-building discourses, clarifies: "But, I have to say, not nostalgic, rather Yugoreferent." Mario, a left-wing party member in coastal Croatia who has moved up the ranks since the interview, offers another angle: "I can say I am socialist-nostalgic. Those progressive ideas of socialist Yugoslavia, that is something toward which we can feel nostalgia. I suppose that is the nostalgia people feel, that nobody cares much about the state." Some approaches to contemporary political identities are thus more antinationalist Yugoslav, like Peter's; others are more socialist-Yugonostalgic,

like Mario's. Both reflect a refusal of nation-state ideologies and a counter-narrative to dominant anti-Yugoslav and anticommunist discourses.

If right-wing interviewees such as Franc may claim that Yugoslavia was hell for more than half of the country, all interviewees belonging to national minorities in all three countries stated that they would have preferred to live in that "hell." Most often, the interviewed last pioneers insist that nobody mourns the state, and some do not mourn the regime, yet they do mourn the values and ideas of the era. Distinguishing between, on the one hand, the societal values of the Yugoslav socialist state and the foundations of its socialist ideology, and on the other, the practical implementation of those values by the regime, reflects a deeper political reasoning about the Yugoslav past—one that reveals profound contemplation. These socialist values include solidarity and brotherhood and unity, concepts already discussed as key remembered values from the last pioneers' childhoods. "The one who knows what he's lost, will know better what he is looking for," writes Predrag Matvejević in *Jugoslavenstvo danas* ["Yugoslavism today"] (2003, 11), a book that continues to serve as both an object of memory and an object of resistance.

The right-wing last pioneers stand firm in their anticommunist reading of Yugonostalgia, a position shared by center-liberal activists who reiterate ethno-national animosities. Borna explains that no open space for dialogue can exist until guilt and responsibility are acknowledged, embracing the logic of transitional justice:

> The earthquake happened in Niš, so I will donate 1,000 kunas. I don't know if you understand this degree [of solidarity]—but [I feel that] regarding the degree of political cooperation of any sort: the farther the better. I am not for building walls, etc., but a lot of the Danube and Sava will flow before we can talk about those issues. True, I said some things happen as they happen, but the war was in my homeland. My old house in which my grandmother lived was shot at and destroyed by a grenade. In my street, thirty people died. Christmas 1991, grenades were falling next to my house. In 1992, next to my house. And now I have all the arguments on my side, even if the opposite side has some arguments of their own (which I have to say in advance are ridiculous). Because the war was conducted on the territory of my homeland, on the territory of Croatia. Not one single grenade fell on the territory of Serbia. Thousands and thousands of volunteers—Chetniks (Is that legitimate to say?)—were in Croatia, and "White Eagles," who burned and butchered and killed in Croatia. I will say today, of course, that war is a nightmare and that you

> always kill and butcher in war and that there were on the Croatian side, of course, those who….
>
> It is very, very important. Today, when you go to Germany and mention the Second World War to any German, he simply stops talking. He looks at the floor and he is ashamed. So, with flowers they were sending the tanks on their way to demolish Vukovar, [where] thousands of our peoples were butchered [and] thrown into pits. I know people who survived Ovčara.[1] We can relativize everything and say, "OK, there was Operation Storm [Oluja]." I agree. The front where the border of Great Serbia was in that moment was three to four kilometers from my city. I took the ferry to the university in Zagreb. My father started stuttering from fear of the grenades that were falling around my house. And I know that in those moments we really had JNA [Yugoslav People's Army] tanks [on one side] and empty-handed people on the other side, no matter how weird it sounds in Serbia now. You don't have to agree with me, regardless of everything. I gave you the context. And now you see what the prerequisite is. The prerequisite is the German one, and that is that the president of Serbia—actually, the Serbian people—understand that they made a mistake in that moment. To say: "We are guilty. We have at one moment demolished, burned, and destroyed another country." It wasn't the *Ustasha* that were looting Belgrade, but people from Serbia who did it in Croatia.

As an example of how the concepts of transitional justice are being used to deepen ethno-national divisions (David 2020), we can see how negative recollections of the war impede present possibilities for future Yugoslav cooperation. For some of our other last pioneers, the JNA remains the subject of confused recollection, with early references Macedonians and Bosnians also participating in war activities. Yet a majority of the last pioneers are more open to the complexities of the wartime past, consciously avoiding the transmission of war grievances to new generations. Zvjezdana in Osijek further reflects:

> Someone who participated in that war was left-wing; he was also a Croat; [and] he also defended his country. I think that we need a revision, an honest dialogue, but I think that people here—both the "little" people,

1 Ovčara was a transit camp for Croatian prisoners under the control of Serbian forces in 1991. It was the site of the mass execution of prisoners at the end of the Battle of Vukovar on November 18, 1991.

> who are not in politics, and the politicians—are not capable of having it. That is an area where they still haven't come clean. And the problem with us is the war. [It created] additional wounds that deepened the left–right division. I think we need a complete change of generations. I look at our kids now. They are growing up completely unencumbered with that [baggage]. I don't even tell them [about it]. I told my son and my daughter that there was a war. I described objectively how it was. I never say Serbs are guilty (some of them protested) or that all Croats were honest and upright. [I say] that Croats also committed crimes and that some Croats made mistakes in some things. They have friends who are Serbs, who are not Croats. I never burden them with that, as it all comes from the family.

The argument that Yugoslav memory is incapable of generating political reflection or political movements surfaces on the left as well, although for reasons distinct from those on the right— rooted not in ethno-national hatreds but in the perceived negative heritage of the Yugoslav past. During our discussion in his parliamentary office in Zagreb, Saša remained adamant that the Yugoslav past cannot serve as inspiration for the future:

> So, on one hand, you are claiming national equality, but, on the other hand, you hope you're not Albanian. On one hand, everybody was equal, but [on the other hand], the generals were members of only one nation, much more often than members of any other. Those are simply the facts. But, also, what is claimed today, that the Croats were neglected in *Juga* [Yugoslavia], is not truly so.

Asked whether Yugonostalgia could be an inspiration for change—given the current state of affairs in (post)Yugoslav countries where everything is the "same, just much poorer," as Fabijan in Zagreb puts it—the last pioneers consider the appearance of nostalgia entirely *normal*. "Of course you have some nostalgia," Vito reiterates. Yet it is precisely this possibility of reading the past differently, and imagining an alternative future, that mainstream discourses attempt to annul. A small number of interviewees view the return of the old system as desirable. Miloš, speaking over coffee in Kragujevac, tells me: "If someone told me you will be in prison for ten years but after that Yugoslavia will come back, I would accept." But the more common sentiment is what Pogačar calls a "hope in a better past" (2013, 118). Distancing themselves from demands for a new Yugoslav state or a simple recreation of the former regime, while insisting on reflection and discussion of both

the positive and negative aspects of the Yugoslav past—this forms the backbone of the (post)Yugoslav memory of the last pioneers. Anchoring these memory narratives and "nostalgic" reflections within global, contemporary, democratic frameworks defies the discursive strategies of the "repressive infantilization" of postsocialist societies (Buden 2012, 41).

It is the political and ideological content of the reflections labeled Yugonostalgic today that is obscured through mainstream discourse, which banalizes the term and uses it to dismiss legitimate left-wing politics. This leaves some interviewees questioning whether Yugonostalgia exists at all: "It doesn't exist. So, there is no Yugonostalgia that everybody talks about. Yugonostalgia appears the moment you start saying that everybody should have the right to free health insurance. And that is when they call you Yugonostalgic." In this way, Dora articulates precisely how Yugonostalgia operates as a discursive strategy, applied to any reflection that seeks to raise left-wing politics—whether in the past or in the present.

A Space for Cognitive Dissonances

Beyond functioning as a practice of discursive strategies that obscures present-day political struggles, Yugonostalgia also appears as a practice that appeases the oft-mentioned cognitive dissonances. Over the past decades, numerous surveys have captured Yugonostalgic sentiments. In a 2012 survey conducted in Serbia, 48.8% of respondents expressed moderately pro-Yugoslav attitudes and 28.1% very pro-Yugoslav attitudes; four-fifths believed that Yugoslavia should not have collapsed, and almost two-thirds believed that socialism should not have collapsed (Mirkov et al. 2018). While quantitative studies make it difficult to determine the precise content of these positive reflections, a wide range of methodologies and researchers consistently reaffirm such positive outlooks on Yugoslavia. Scholars have interpreted these sentiments variously: as a bridge for communication between currently conflicted ethnic communities and a means of silencing war memories (Palmberger 2016), or as a critique of "today's Slovenian Other, meaning all the systemic injustices of contemporary Slovenian society" (Perica and Velikonja 2012, 160). The (post)Yugoslav subjectivity of the last pioneers helps us understand Yugonostalgia as "the escape sought from [that] uncertainty" (Bauman 1996, 19)—an escape from the uncertainties produced by (post)Yugoslav ethno-nationalisms and neoliberal transitions. This escape leads our last pioneers toward continuity with the safe and happy memories of their Yugoslav childhoods, the openness of the Yugoslav family,

and the sentiment of a Yugoslav home. Regardless of whether one avoids or aligns with particular forms of Yugoslavisms, Yugonostalgia emerges as a practice that soothes uncertainty.

Through the totality of their life narratives, the last pioneers display a high degree of *ambivalence toward Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav past*, even as they recount positive memories from their childhoods—memories that often conflict with contemporary mainstream discourses. Yet even mainstream discourses leave room for ambivalence, presenting contradictory narratives of their own. The understanding that Yugonostalgia provides a refuge for cognitive dissonance within the memory narratives of the last pioneers stems from the notion of ambivalent nostalgia, which allows space for both positive and negative feelings (Hirsch and Spitzer 2002).

At the same time, Yugonostalgia's capacity to hold ambivalence helps explain why the term is not readily embraced by political actors, including politically active last pioneers. When a term carries too much ambiguity, it produces discomfort and the fear of being misunderstood. The more public one's role, the more one avoids pathways to misrepresentation. This ambiguity permeates the lives of the last pioneers. Vito, taking another sip of beer in the Zagreb summer, reflects on the contradictory positions of his parents:

> My mother always honestly says that everything was better before. My father-in-law, who is a liberal, is also from a mixed marriage.... His father is a Serb, his mother a Croat. I told him about research [which showed that] in 1988, the salaries were 30% higher than today, and he said: "Yes, yes, I worked through a student service, and I had tons of money." And my brother's wife has parents who are also right-wing [and supporters of] HDZ [Croatian Democratic Union]. Her father says: "No, under Tito things were in order." They got social housing in 1989. On the one hand, he will say [the old system] was honest, but, on the other hand, he votes for HDZ. I don't know how to explain it. It's very schizophrenic.

Ambivalent discourses also mirror ambivalent political cleavages. Political parties often remain distanced from socio-economic issues, making it difficult to position themselves on the traditional left–right spectrum (Dolenec 2013; Stojiljković et al. 2013). Traditionalism and modernism therefore emerge as key cleavage elements in the political landscapes of the (post)Yugoslav countries. Traditionalism is embedded in ethno-nationalist discourses, shaping political actors' stances on—and roles within—memory politics. This cacophony of narratives creates space for the nationalization of antifascism,

leading to cases such as Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, from the HDZ, sending a wreath to the Sutjeska commemorations in 2019.[2] The result is a confusing mish-mash of narratives. Publicly antinationalist figures, like then center-liberal opposition leader in Serbia Sergej Trifunović, was filmed singing Chetnik songs in 2020. Otherwise neoliberal, the Mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Janković, has defended the annual left-wing concerts *Nosil bom rdečo zvezdo* ("I will wear the red star") in the city center. And yet, in the officially least Yugonostalgic country of the (post)Yugoslav space—Croatia—Lepa Brena sang her Yugoslav hit song "Jugoslovenka" to a sold-out Arena in Zagreb in 2019. These intermingling public discourses send contradictory messages and offer no coherent memory narrative, reinforcing top-down revisionist politics.

Here, Yugonostalgia shows its capacity to appease the cognitive dissonance between individual memories and the hegemonic narratives internalized. Rather than engaging in deeper reflections on Yugoslav history, neo-ethno-nationalist subjects retreat into private spaces of nostalgia to maintain their ability to hold multiple truths, often invoked through music. While such practices can carry strong political meaning (Hofman 2016; Petrov 2016), they do not necessarily reflect the political positionality of mnemonic actors; many right-wing actors attend these (post)Yugoslav concerts. Despite Samid's claims about the disintegration of the (post) Yugoslav cultural space, when asked to define Yugonostalgia, he explains: "It is mostly an emotional state when you have a low moment, and then you listen to Džoni Štulić,[3] I don't know, Bijelo dugme[4] or something… and you enjoy running away from the reality and the madness that surrounds you." The music industry continues to cooperate across borders, reflecting free-market realities and a collaboration that never ceased, even during the 1990s wars (Perković 2011). For instance, Zdravko Čolić released an album in 2017 through two major publishing houses: PGP RTS in Serbia and Croatia Records in Croatia. This reflects not a Yugonostalgic endeavor but a (post)Yugoslav one shaped by the changed economic system. Beyond

2 Considered a decisive moment for Yugoslavia in the Second World War, the Battle of Sutjeska—also known as *Fall Schwarz* or the Fifth Enemy Offensive—was a 1943 Axis operation in south-eastern Bosnia aimed at destroying the Partisan forces, an objective it ultimately failed to achieve.

3 Branimir "Johnny" Štulić is a Yugoslav musician and the former frontman of one of the most popular Yugoslav rock groups, Azra. A fervent Yugoslav by conviction, he has lived in the Netherlands since the late 1980s.

4 *Bijelo Dugme* (White Button) was the best-selling Yugoslav rock band, formed in Sarajevo and active from 1974 to 1989.

music and remembering, our last pioneers note that traveling through the (post)Yugoslav space—where they feel at *home*—evokes strong nostalgic sentiments and associations with love, as do certain material objects and childhood brands.

Home also travels. The carpooling Facebook group 442,[5] created by individuals who frequently moved between Belgrade and Zagreb for professional or private reasons (often romantic ones), exemplifies the solidarity networks emerging in the contemporary era of social media and self-organization. As mnemonic agents travel with their memories, new communities form and older ones expand—communities grounded in solidarity and resonating across intimate, artistic, cultural, and political fields. This occurs even beyond the (post)Yugoslav space. Marta continues narrating her adventures and viewpoints in the center of Split as we order a second cup of coffee:

> I was in Morocco in a café in Tangier. It is a cinematic city.... Some woman recommended it to me. [She told us], as I see you and your friend [are going], there is a super cafe, if they let you in. It is the best place to have a drink. We went there. It was about closing time [and] two or three sixty-year-old guys were there. We asked them if we could have a beer, and they ask, "Where are you from?" They are sick of tourists. So I tell them, "from Yugoslavia." "Oh, if you are from Yugoslavia, then you can." And we sit with them and there were all these stories of why Yugoslavia was cool for them.

Shared experiences further intensity the reach for a different past. Whether framed as Yugoslav or (post)Yugoslav, the common political reality of the (post)Yugoslav states is reflected in poverty: "Now people go fishing here because they are hungry, not because it is a hobby," Dušan, positioned on the right of the political spectrum in Serbia, tells us. The contradiction between the once-promised bright future expected after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the present conditions engenders Yugonostalgic practices across political positionalities: in identitarian terms, these may take the form of cultural and anti-neoliberal Yugoslavism. Such practices provide a sense of continuity of home alongside the experience of its loss: "I am not here at home, and I go home and I am not at home there either," explains Kenan.

5 The group has since essentially ceased to exist, with Blablacar (an app) taking over. It was at the peak of its activity between approximately 2015 and 2019.

Resistance Strategies

These Yugonostalgic practices shift in form depending on generational and political positionality, moving beyond allegedly *banal* cultural expressions. Yugonostalgia interacts with the political identities of the last pioneers in ways shaped more by political and ideological cleavages than by ethno-national identity or country of origin or residence. Meta-national, hopeful Yugoslavism channels into Yugonostalgia, which appears as a multiplicity of resistance strategies, with the convergence occurring along lines of political positionality. Perceptions of Yugonostalgia's political potential closely correlate with the personal memory narratives of each interviewee. The stronger the meta-national Yugoslavism, the stronger the tendency to attribute political potentiality to Yugonostalgia; conversely, among left-wing last pioneers, the closer one stands to the liberal center, the less likely one is to assign political significance to Yugoslav memory narratives.

When the last pioneers try to explain what Yugonostalgia represents for them, their answers range from simple reminiscences of seaside vacations to the *emotional charge* of seeing friends from another Yugoslav republic today. Yet their political socialization remains unmistakable. Miro, an MP from Croatia who works daily to improve inter-ethnic relations, states: "That idea of equality, of freedom, of brotherhood and unity, of the Antifascist People's Liberation Struggle, of antifascism has definitely been sown into me. That is most certainly a consequence of my socialization and growing up in the system. I am aware of it and that is my DNA." Recognizing the importance of emotions and affects in the political field remains crucial (Ahmed 2014; Bericat 2015; Gregg and Seigworth 2010), as does distinguishing between politically potent emotional content and intimate affects. Our life narratives shape who we are, offering interpretive lenses through which we mold and reshape our memories. Emotions provide frameworks for understanding our lives, our memories, and our political behavior. Denying them in intimate life requires a struggle to assert one's reality; denying them collectively invites counterstrategies and contentious politics aimed at re-legitimizing one's worldview.

Asserting what Yugonostalgia *is not* remains as important as identifying what it *is*. Vito explains the distinction between "his" Yugonostalgia and "the Others'":

> So, in the sense of this completely unconscious, banal level. Those are the groups that gather in Kumrovec. It seems to be the peasantry; ideologically, it is not on that level.... There is, of course, my elitism. I can be aware of

> it. I can recognize some positive sides, too.... But, to be honest, at first, it is repulsive to me. I am aware of the layers I necessarily have, and, honestly, those things are repulsive to me. In that old-fashioned way, with the old-fashioned phraseology and rhetoric, I really don't like it. I think it is not productive. And, on the other side, the Yugonostalgia that I have and that exists in *my party*,[6] that is something completely natural to me. And to try to look only forward, you cannot look only forward. A couple of times I asked my parents, "So what the fuck did you do? I was little, but your generation has generally really fucked it up!" I see it from my position: if something like that had continued, I would have a bigger salary [and] a free summer vacation. I would have social housing.

A compatible outlook emerges from Filip, also in Croatia: "Talking about Yugonostalgia is demeaning the heritage of what we once had and we don't have anymore." None of the interviewees believe that a positive view of specific features of the past regime lacks relevance or truth. For the left-wing last pioneers, thinking about Yugonostalgia largely centers on values, visions, and ideas. In Novi Sad, Una offers a different perspective, and she is among the few interviewees who do not shy away from being called Yugonostalgic:

> It is simply that Yugonostalgia—which exists in leftist circles [and] which is reduced to, I don't know, crazy parties and nonstop Yugoslavism—seems funny to me. And [it is] completely unproductive politically. I don't know what they do with it. But the part when it is theoretically thought through and when texts are being translated, when texts are being written, when books are being written, that is serious for me and that should be done. And I think that we mostly need that.

And yet, in Croatia, Anka—albeit in harsher terms—agrees with Una: "I still think that Yugoslavia has a subversive potential, but I think that nostalgia should fuck off because it is perceived at the emotional and psychological level, and it does not deal with it at the level at which it should. I know I am too rigid, I know that what I say is maybe too abstract, but basically that's it. You cannot say it differently." Paradoxically, Anka and Borna converge here: both consider nostalgia a lost cause while insisting that more scholarly research on Yugoslav history is needed, albeit with different aims in mind. On both the left and the right, the economic and other achievements of Yugoslavia are questioned.

6 The exact name has been removed here for the purposes of anonymization.

Nevertheless, why remember the Yugoslav past as "something that shouldn't be easily lost," as Melita, a left-wing party member, puts it? As she elaborated her view in her office in a coastal town in Slovenia, I realized how closely her narrative aligned with what Vlado told me in a café in Rijeka, a coastal town in Croatia. With a long history of left-wing antinationalist activism, Vlado consistently translates the remembrance of Yugoslav history into a political demand:

> [We are] mourning for things that truly functioned much better than [they do] now in Croatia. [The way things are] in Croatia today is a consequence of privatization, denationalization, the free market, [and] the loss of economic and social rights, which were guaranteed [in the past], no matter how they were exercised. An apartment, a salary, social security, health care, retirement, education. Those are the objective elements, I suppose, for which you can say that it was better than today, especially if you understand why today is as it is.

From such examples, our last pioneers question how a reasonable comparison between past and present can be dismissed as Yugonostalgia. While fidgeting, Aleksa succinctly concludes that "if most people had it worse in [socialist] Yugoslavia, there wouldn't be Yugonostalgia," adding that, for example, no one is nostalgic for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the state created in 1992 under Slobodan Milošević. Nevertheless, perceptions of the 1990s—discussed in previous chapters—may differ according to generational and class positionality. In his research, Rory Archer notes that for some blue-collar workers in Serbia, narratives of the 1990s are not exclusively negative, due to residual upward mobility and the further deterioration of conditions in the 2000s during the transition, which reshaped memories of the 1990s (Archer 2018). Yet among the interviewed last pioneers, positive memories of socialist Yugoslavia are overwhelmingly present and grounded in historical realities.

But how does this translate into action, if at all? A generational shift in academia over the past decade has already brought significant progress: (new) Yugoslav studies have gained prominence in universities and research institutes across the (post)Yugoslav space and beyond, with the New Yugoslav Studies Association (NYSA) steadily expanding.[7] Formal and informal cooperation among

7 From the NYSA website: "The New Yugoslav Studies Association is an ASEEES-affiliated interdisciplinary organization dedicated to the study of the Yugoslav political project, culture, and society from a transnational perspective. The association exists to facilitate critical scholarly

political actors across the (post)Yugoslav borders is also increasing across the political spectrum. Recalling the 2016 visit of Ivan Pernar, representative of the Croatian populist political movement "Živi zid," to Dveri, the right-wing party in Serbia, the last pioneer from Dveri described how negatively the visit was received in the Serbian Parliament by older generations—ironically, many MPs labeled Dveri as Ustashas. Cross-border cooperation among right-wing movements is not new, but in the (post)Yugoslav space this marked a generational shift, at least in terms of transparency. Previously, such cooperation existed mainly in marginal spaces, such as anarchist activism. As Maple Razsa observes in *Bastards of Utopia: Living Radical Politics After Socialism*: "Ironically, despite their disavowal of the kind of Yugonostalgia common among the older generation of antinationalists, this anarchist youth subculture has been more successful than any other social group in the postwar life of the region in producing strong cross-border links—effectively recreating a transnational cultural space among former Yugoslavs" (Razsa 2015, 49). While one could remain skeptical of the claim that anarchist groups were the most successful, it is clear that links among activists, artists, academics, and others have been renewed since the war—if they were ever broken. Until recently, however, these connections were found among the "usual suspects"; the generation of the last pioneers has brought new alliances.

In another paradox, right-wing movements were transparent about their cooperation. By contrast, Hrvoje, from a center-left social movement turned political party in Croatia, explained that although his group had long-term cooperation with a similar organization in Serbia, they chose not to publicize it, adhering to a political strategy of concealing their (post)Yugoslav ties with fellow activists across the border.[8] As he put it: "Yes, we are left-wing; we stick to the issues of the left, but we deal [primarily] with the city and topics around the city and questions that are important for the city. You cannot force us to discuss Tito!" For Hrvoje, focusing on future-oriented and local politics translates into avoiding engagement with memory politics around the socialist Yugoslav past. He firmly believes that Yugonostalgia has no subversive potential:

> Except as a joke, as a phenomenon where at a party you like Zdravko Čolić and I don't know what, and you sing Yugoslav songs and that is

inquiry, promote exchange of knowledge about Yugoslavia, and maintain its legacies and ongoing relevance." https://www.newyugoslavstudies.org/

8 During the 2017 local elections in Croatia, the support was still kept discreet. Since then, cooperation and support have become more openly acknowledged.

> subversive only because it's against a dominant frame, and not because it truly contains subversion. I don't see it. Another issue is the question of socialism, of self-management, OK,… but Yugoslavism as an identity?… Of course, it is a subversion against the Ustasha. If you arrive and say you are a Yugoslav, then they freeze. You can use it as a joke, but I don't see how it has serious potential for political organizing. If we separate Yugoslavism from socialism, from self-management. You take the Yugoslav identity [and] imagine it in capitalism, without socialism, without Tito, without the NOB [People's Liberation Struggle].
>
> I know that there are certainly more people who are more nostalgic than me and who will say in principle that Yugoslavia is truly a great project. Which also shows that it is not that important, because it is not an issue on which we will connect or separate. And the issue of privatization, you understand. We will never sit down and cooperate with anyone who believes health care should be privatized and that is good. So maybe that is the criterion of importance. And antifascism is something we have to agree upon. But the issue of whether Yugoslavia was OK or not, if self-management was more or less corrupt, and if it was at all corrupt or it was great, ideal, and perfect. All that spectrum, from those who think that it is fake to those who think it is ideal, we work together and it works. It is maybe good to understand how important it is in political alliances or not. I think that the really important points are the topics of public good, antifascism,… not topics, but a common denominator that is certainly there. Antinationalism, yes, but not necessarily in a Yugoslav form, but in a sense that the national is not that important. And secularism. That is against the existing context.

In recent years, however, this dynamic has begun to shift. In 2020, the then-mayor of Rijeka, Vojko Obersnel of the Social Democratic Party, appeared at the carnival disguised as Tito's wife, the Partisan Jovanka Broz ("Riječki gradonačelnik Vojko Obersnel prošetao kao Jovanka Broz," 2020). In doing so, he drew on a mode of performative and humorous nostalgia, yet in the Croatian context it was a bold and provocative gesture. The year 2020 marked a shift in Croatian politics, opening additional space for overtly left-wing initiatives and resulting in new left victories. Several small left-wing movements and parties formed a coalition (Možemo, or We Can) for the 2020 parliamentary elections, winning seven seats. Although their discourses on the Yugoslav past differ, all strongly oppose mainstream anti-Yugoslav discourses.

One issue that unites the left across all three countries is the demand for open reflection and debate on Yugoslav history and the Yugoslav regime—both as a source of ideas for addressing the negative present and as a way to confront the discursive strategies of nationalist and revisionist elites. In her party offices, Dora, another left-wing activist in Croatia, elaborates:

> I think [Yugonostalgia is] romantic in a positive sense. Not crying over something that was, but simply as a space that can be … an idea that can turn into an action. I think that Yugoslavia was not achieved; the idea of Yugoslavia was not achieved. Just like the idea of socialism. We tried, and it somewhat worked.… So, I really have a high opinion of that project.…
>
> Of course, those who had a job think they failed in capitalism, because they lost their jobs. But, then again, you can also hear from the workers that it cannot be like that. Of course, the owner wants his piece. We are not in socialism anymore. They are the last ones who should talk like that, you see. But then, other things are also discredited, because they existed before the 1990s, like trade union movements. It is also a remnant of the past. And you should also deal with those trade unionists, because, my God, there are no trade unions in Germany. They don't exist. And so,… what is actually the biggest problem is that any sort of resistance to today's system is discredited as something that was overcome.

And Mateja agrees, as we sip coffee in the center of Zagreb, where she is visiting from Rijeka:

> I think we should talk more about Yugoslavia—firstly, as an answer to the revisionist tendencies, and, secondly, as an answer to what should we do, how can we learn some useful lessons [about] organization, from the good practices that existed in Yugoslavia. If we are to talk about the left today and the alternative answers, we cannot do it without something connected to Yugoslavia. I said a hundred times, don't annoy me with "*Zagreb je naš!*"[9] pale libertarian models that look up to Sweden. There was something more serious here.

9 *Zagreb je NAŠ!* (Zagreb Is Ours!) is a green left political party from Zagreb which entered the city assembly in 2017. Subsequently, it joined the *Možemo* (We Can) coalition for the parliamentary elections in 2020.

The left-wing political actors interviewed seek to rethink and reconceptualize the Yugoslav past without "falling into the trap" of Yugonostalgia. The discursive connotations attached to Yugonostalgia illustrate the success of mainstream memory politics; the term has been so degraded in public discourse that no one wishes to be labeled Yugonostalgic. Instead, the Yugoslav past is viewed as a reservoir of ideas and inspirations to be reinterpreted—never replicated—for example, when considering economic alternatives to contemporary neoliberal policies.

At the same time, some left-wing movements do deploy Yugonostalgia in their public discourse, though these cases are rare and marginal. Radnička fronta from Croatia, for instance, occasionally posts factual content about the Yugoslav past on Facebook, which they report is well received, though interaction remains limited to their approximately 41,000 followers (see figure 6.1).[10] Left-wing political actors in Slovenia likewise believe that certain Yugonostalgic references can be useful. Peter, a member of a new left party, notes that "I happily use it as a good practice example," while Melita, from the same party, even frames it as a retroutopian concept, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past" (2017, 5): "I think that we as humans need utopias, we need them, in a political sense and in all other senses. Utopia is something



Figure 6.1. Radnička fronta Facebook page 2018, "Leftovers of a lost civilization much more advanced than ours". In the photo is the Petrova Gora Monument (Kordun, Croatia) by Vojin Bakić, erected during the socialist period, which was seriously damaged in the 1990s and never reconstructed.

10 This was the figure when the page was accessed on October 24, 2020.

that motivates you in a way." For Melita, Yugonostalgia offers a canvas for imagining the future through recollection of the past—the only utopian horizon the last pioneers know. Normalizing the past also enables progress in the present. Moving away from anticommunism, Rok, a left-wing MP in Slovenia, observes that even their simple presence in parliament, openly declaring a socialist ideology, has shifted public perception: "They don't laugh at us anymore when we say we are socialists."

Socialism, inherent to Yugoslavism and extending beyond notions of cultural or ethno-national proximity, constitutes an inseparable element of Yugoslav identity for actors on the left, grounded in the shared struggle against fascism (Buden 2003, 54). Encompassing collective mourning for the loss of social solidarity (Scribner 2003) and nostalgia for emancipation, along with "a sense of personal degradation and humiliation… strongly emphasized by the workers when they talk about the postsocialist period" (Petrović 2017, 19), the Yugonostalgia of the last pioneers illuminates "matters of urgent importance in the present" (Assmann and Shortt 2012, xi).

Research has already confirmed the unifying elements within youth political attitudes across the (post)Yugoslav space, showing that "attitudes on employment and socio-economic outlook… unite Southeast European young adults in their ambivalence toward the EU, their fear of job insecurity and their deep distrust of institutionalized politics" (Pavasović Trošt and Mandić 2018, 6). If, for their parents' generation, carrying Yugoslav flags at trade-union protests—such as the May 1, 2017 demonstration in Belgrade (see figure 6.2)—evoked nostalgic narratives of *how it once was*, for our last pioneers such Yugonostalgic references signal *how it can be once again*.

The politically active last pioneers cooperate across the (post)Yugoslav space and across the political spectrum. We have already discussed instances of right-wing cooperation between Serbia and Croatia. Sitting in his office, Jože, a right-wing member of parliament in Slovenia, continues recounting his experiences in international organizations. He notes that generational positionality shapes group dynamics in these environments, superseding political affiliation, despite the dissolution and subsequent wars. Describing the usual after-work gatherings, Jože explains that whenever our last pioneers went for a drink together: "[Someone would always say] 'People, look,… we are from the former Yugoslavia. Let's go together.' … There was nothing like, 'OK, you are from the Croatian right-wing, you are from the Serbian left-wing.' There was never anything like that." Later, in a small gas-station café in the port of Koper, Boštjan—a prominent trade-union activist from the older cohort of the last pioneers—struggles to find the right words to articulate his understanding of Yugoslavism and Yugonostalgia.



Figure 6.2. May 1 protest organized by various trade unions and movements in Serbia, author's archive, 2017.

Instead, he explains them through action: the ongoing intensive cooperation among port workers' unions in Koper (Slovenia), Rijeka (Croatia), and Bar (Montenegro) along the Adriatic coast.

In July 2020, following the COVID-19 crisis, the Zagreb earthquake, and anti-government protests in Belgrade, the Sarajevo architect and artist Midhat Kapetanović created an illustration depicting Vučko (the 1984

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Annex: The Last Pioneers—The Sample

The qualitative nature of this study precludes broad generalizations, and the generation of the last pioneers represented here does not—and cannot—stand in for the fullrichness and diversity of that cohort. Still, their narratives offer insight into the experiences of people who grew up during a certain period, who shared the same milestones as they grew up—the same school classes, television programs, movies, and music hits—and inhabited the same Yugoslav culture sphere. Through the stories they told and the memories they carried, they became the generation of the last pioneers in this book. Who are they?

Table 1. Sample by Country

	Number of interviews	Number of discarded interviews	Final sample
Slovenia	*21*	*3*	*18*
Croatia	*23*	-	*23*
Serbia	*23*	*2*	*21*
Total	***67***	***5***	***62***

The gender structure reflects the overall low representation of women in politics: forty-two interviewees were men and twenty were women. In Slovenia, women made up 22.23% of the interviewees; in Croatia, 34.45%; and in Serbia, 38.1%. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union data, the proportion of women in national parliaments in 2018 was similar: 24.4% in Slovenia, 20.5% in Croatia, and 37.7% in Serbia (Inter-Parliamentary Union, accessed 2026). In Croatia and Serbia, the higher participation of non-institutional political actors influenced the gender distribution, yet the sample still accurately reflects the persistently low levels of women's participation in political activism (see table 2).

Regarding the citizenship of the interviewees, Slovenia and Croatia each had only one participant with dual citizenship (Slovenia–Croatia and Croatia–Bosnia and Herzegovina). In Serbia, however, six interviewees held

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dual citizenship: three with Bosnia and Herzegovina, two with Croatia, and one with Hungary. Slovenia does not permit dual citizenship in cases of naturalization (Deželan 2012, 233). However, citizenship neither fully captures the ethno-national entanglements of personal identity nor necessarily reflects conscious decision-making. In the (post)Yugoslav context, citizenship is more often the outcome of unintended circumstances and top-down policies implemented by newly established states than an expression of deliberate political or identitarian choice.

Table 2. Gender and Citizenship

	Gender		*Citizenship*				
	Male	Female	Slovenian	Croatian	Serbian	Double citizens	***TOTAL***
Slovenia	*14*	*4*	*18*	*-*	*-*	*1*	***18***
Croatia	*15*	*8*	*-*	*23*	*-*	*1*	***23***
Serbia	*13*	*8*	*-*	*-*	*21*	*6*	***21***
Total	***42***	***20***	***18***	***23***	***21***	***8***	***62***

When asked how they self-identify in ethno-national terms, only one interviewee unequivocally identified as Yugoslav. Four others mentioned Yugoslav identity as a possibility—an option they had considered, intended to adopt in the future, or reflected upon without acting on it. In two cases in Serbia and two in Croatia, interviewees invoked the idea of being Yugoslav but ultimately declared a different identity.

Sixteen interviewees hesitated before answering, often adding explanations that bordered on justification. Some emphasized that their ethno-national identification was merely a consequence of their citizenship or country of residence; others insisted that the question was irrelevant to them; several immediately highlighted their "mixed" origins, and a number stated that they had already decided to stop declaring an ethno-national identity in the future. Ethno-national identity remains deeply contested among the last pioneers. Seen as the primary vehicle of nationalism, it is something from which many feel compelled to distance themselves—given its framing as a central cause of the wars and suffering in the (post)Yugoslav space during the 1990s.

Eight interviewees stated that they do not declare an ethno-national identity at all: four in Serbia, three in Croatia, and one in Slovenia. Yet nearly half of all interviewees come from what are commonly referred to as "mixed

marriages," a factor that plays a significant role in shaping ethno-national self-identification.

Table 3. Ethno-National Self-Identification

	Slovene	Croat	Serb	Bosnian[1]	Bosniak	Hungarian	Yugoslav	Does not declare
Slovenia[2]	*9*	-	-	*1*	-	-	-	*1*
with reservations[3]	*6*	*1*	-	*1*	-	-	-	-
Croatia	-	*12*	*1*	-	-	-	*1*	*3*
with reservations	-	*5*	*1*	-	-	-	-	-
Serbia	-	-	*11*	-	*2*	*1*	-	*4*
with reservations	-	-	*1*	-	-	-	*2*	-
Total	***15***	***18***	***15***	***2***	***2***	***1***	***3***	***8***

Another important characteristic of the sample is that the majority of interviewees belong to a higher social and economic class. Because political activism—like gender— was a central variable, socio-economic status was not a controlled variable. Thus, this reflects the situation regarding the politically active generation of the last pioneers in the three countries. This aligns with established findings that citizens from higher socio-economic classes are more politically active and that higher levels of education encourage political participation (Dalton 2017, 44; Verba and Nie 1972, 125). An overwhelming majority of interviewees hold higher education degrees—B.A., M.A. or Ph.D.—reaching nearly 90% (see table 4). This illustrates the limited participation of lower-educated groups in the political field across the (post)

1 Bosnian (and Herzegovinian) refers to a national of the entire state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a category that transcends ethno-national divisions. Bosniak, by contrast, denotes the historically Muslim community in Yugoslavia, present across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia.

2 The total number in the table is 19, as one interviewee identified as both Slovene and Croat, and is therefore counted in two ethno-national categories.

3 This line refers to interviewees who declared belonging to an ethno-national group with qualifications: those who added that it was not important to them; those who identified with two ethno-nationalities; those who did not declare but explained that, due to citizenship or residence, a particular ethno-national identification "fits" them; and those who described their identity as complicated, often because they come from mixed marriages.

Yugoslav space, a pattern with broaders implications beyond the scope of this book.

Higher education expanded rapidly in socialist Yugoslavia, where access to education was a key development priority. Yugoslavia advanced "from one of the lowest ranking countries—26th—in 1921, with ninety-three students per 100,000 inhabitants, to eighth rank in 1971 (1,272 per 100,000) … among European countries, only Sweden (fifth) and Finland (seventh) fared better" (Duller 2018, 172–173). As the last generation of pioneers, the interviewees benefited from this expansion and from the social mobility it afforded their parents. The educational backgrounds of their parents are more varied, though still marked by a high proportion of higher education. In six cases, parents had only primary education—a pattern shaped by gender, as four of these cases concern mothers (with the highest incidence in Slovenia). Secondary and tertiary parental education levels are nearly evenly split. Yet parental social mobility did not emerge as a variable that strongly influenced the last pioneers' responses.

Table 4. Education Levels and Background

	Education of the interviewees				*Education of the parents*						
	Sec. ed.	BA	MA	PhD	Primary		Secondary		Tertiary		unclear
					mother	father	mother	father	mother	father	
Slovenia	*3*	*10*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*1*	*5*	*6*	*6*	*8*	*1*
Croatia	*3*	*11*	*3*	*6*	*-*	*1*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*10*	*1*
Serbia	*-*	*14*	*5*	*2*	*-*	*-*	*12*	*9*	*8*	*11*	*1*
Total	***6***	***35***	***10***	***11***	***4***	***2***	***27***	***26***	***26***	***29***	***3***

Regarding our last pioneers' place of residence, the sample is diverse (see table 5). About half of the interviewees live in the capital cities—Ljubljana,[4] Zagreb, and Belgrade—while the other half are distributed across cities and towns with fewer than 300,000 inhabitants. This distribution reflects the demographic structure of each country: in Slovenia, interviewees reside either in the capital or in smaller towns of fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. Mobility features prominently in their biographies.

4 Even though Ljubljana has fewer than 300,000 inhabitants, it was included with the other capital cities in the categorization of respondents' place of residence.

Many moved to larger cities for their studies and later returned to their hometowns, a pattern especially visible in Slovenia. In addition, ten interviewees were refugees, their mobility shaped by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

Table 5. Place of Residence and City Population

	Capital[5]	>100,000	20,000– 99,999	1,000– 19,999	<1,000
Slovenia	*9*	-	*5*	*4*	-
Croatia	*10*	*7*	*2*	*2*	*1*
Serbia	*12*	*5*	*4*	-	-
Total	***31***	***12***	***11***	***6***	***1***

The most important variable in selecting interviewees—beyond their belonging to the generation of the last pioneers—was their political activism. Approximately one-third (32.26%) were members of parliament,[6] while an additional fourteen were political party members without parliamentary seats. In total, more than half of the interviewees were members of political parties operating at the national level. Outside national-level politics, eight interviewees were active in local political parties, initiatives, or movements that neither existed nor sought representation at the national level. This variable has shifted over time: several social movements in Croatia and Serbia have since transformed into political parties and begun acting as national-level political actors.

Beyond institutional party politics, one-third of the interviewees were activists in NGOs, trade unions, and other politically engaged movements. In Serbia, a sharper distinction emerged between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics: the majority of non-MP interviewees were political actors within social movements and grassroots initiatives. Given the high frequency of parliamentary elections, the political landscape had already changed significantly by the time fieldwork was conducted.

5 One resident of the Croatian capital Zagreb and two residents of the Serbian capital Belgrade reported dual residency.

6 At the time of the fieldwork (2017/2018).

Table 6. Type of Political Activism

	Members of parliament	Party members, not MPs	Local movements and political parties	NGOs and trade unions
Slovenia	*5*	*7*	*2*	*4*
Croatia	*6*	*7*	*3*	*7*
Serbia	*9*	-	*3*	*9*
Total	***20***	***14***	***8***	***20***

Political identification was left entirely to the interviewees. Rather than applying political-science criteria to classify them along the political spectrum, the introductory part of each interview invited them to self-identify. This provided an important insight how they themselves understand the classical left–right cleavage and offered an additional lens through which to interpret their views on (post)Yugoslav politics and global politics today.

A majority of interviewees self-identified as left-wing (58.06%). Although the intention was to include last pioneers across the entire political spectrum, the topic of the research and the purposive snowball sampling approach naturally contributed to this outcome. Left-wing last pioneers were generally more willing to discuss the Yugoslav past and their own relationship to it. Attempts to contact the most right-wing political actors were often unsuccessful, and establishing contact with right-wing actors proved more time-consuming—especially in Croatia. Only 14.52% of interviewees self-identified as right-wing.

For several interviewees, self-identification was difficult. Some questioned or rejected the left–right spectrum altogether, describing it as artificial or outdated. Among those who identified as centrists, left-leaning interviewees sometimes claimed they belonged to the right, and vice versa. Those who identified as left-wing could be further divided into the "established left" (social-democratic and socialist parties emerging from the League of Communists) and the "new left: generally progressive political and social movements … that present themselves or are labeled as the 'radical left'" (Štiks 2015, 137). Seventeen interviewees stated that they came from "communist" families, attributing their political socialization to a left-wing family environment supportive of socialist Yugoslavia. While political self-identification did not always produce clear analytical distinctions—many findings cut across the spectrum—it was included whenever relevant, particularly when certain narratives or tropes appeared more frequently within one group: right, center, or left.

Table 7. Political Self-Identification

	left	center left	center/ liberal	center right	right	libertarian	unclear
Slovenia	*8*	*3*	-	*1*	*2*	-	*4*
Croatia	*18*	*2*	-	-	*3*	-	-
Serbia	*10*	-	*2*	-	*4*	*1*	*4*
Total	***36***	***5***	***2***	***1***	***9***	***1***	***8***

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