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Event Analysis

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Nationalism and the agency of musical performers in Serbia in the 1990s: A discussion with Dragana Mirković

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Introduction: Pop folk music, the agency of performers and Serbia in the 1990s

Research on popular folk music in Serbia and other parts of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s has claimed close ties between performers and Serbian nationalism.¹ Authors have pointed to symbolic links between singers and the regime of Slobodan Milošević and ultra-nationalist public figures. The most notorious example of connections between folk music performers and Serbian nationalism was the 1995 marriage between popular singer Svetlana Veličković-Ceca and paramilitary leader Željko Ražnatović-Arkan.² This cemented the idea of a symbiotic relationship between pop-folk music and warmongering nationalism that aimed to foster an immoral value system. For example, Ivana Kronja writes that ‘This system of values aimed to establish the cult of crime and violence, war-profiteering, national-chauvinism and provincialism, together with the abandonment of morals, education, legality, and other civic values.’³

Other scholars caution the unproblematic assumption that Serbian pop-folk music and nationalism were so intimately connected. A regional overview of the development of a pan-Balkan pop-folk music market in the 1990s and 1990s stresses transnational links and dissemination, borrowing between various regional and national musical styles, the presence of national and sexual minorities in music production, and the importance of structural conditions like newly formed postsocialist music markets.⁴ Almost 20 years after the ousting of Milošević, pop-music styles remain popular in Serbia and across the Balkans while the gap between this style and other genres has become ever more blurred.

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¹ I am very grateful to Catherine Baker, Ana Hofman and Krisztina Rácz for their comments on earlier versions of this text.

² Gordy, Eric. 1999. *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 138.

³ Kronja, Ivana. 2004. Turbo Folk and Dance Music in 1990s Serbia: Media, Ideology, and the Production of Spectacle. *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* 22(1), 103.

⁴ Buchanan, Donna. (ed.). 2008. *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image and Regional Political Discourse*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press; Archer, Rory. 2012. Assessing Turbofolk Controversies: Popular Music between the Nation and the Balkans. *Southeastern Europe* 36(2), 178–207.

In the studies of Balkan pop-folk music, the professional musicians who have often formed symbolic reference points in national ethnopolitical discourse in former Yugoslav societies⁵ and informed scholarly discussions about music, identity and belonging in postsocialist Balkan societies have seldom been given a voice in academic debates. Usually, their views, attitudes and articulations are gleaned from musical texts, visual aspects of performances and statements made to media. This short contribution aims to bring one voice into such discussions. It draws on a public lecture delivered at the University of Graz in May 2015 by performer Dragana Mirković titled ‘The (Non)Politics of Folk Music’. Held as part of a lecture series on music and nationalism, Mirković was invited to speak on the topic in her own terms in the capacity of a performer who lived and worked in Serbia during the 1990s. She stressed that performers could demonstrate agency within the narrowed confines of 1990s Serbia, albeit agency that was constrained by the authoritarian and politicised context, conditioned by the demands of the shrunken market and the dire economic situation under international sanctions.

Initially apprehensive (‘This is the first time I am in this position and I am a bit nervous to be honest with you’), over the next two hours of her lecture and discussion with the audience Dragana Mirković expressed her own memories of being a young star in the 1980s late Yugoslav socialism, recollections about the destruction of the state and descent to war in the 1990s, and her experience of life in Austria where she has resided since 2000 while continuing to maintain a transnational musical career in the countries of the Balkans and in the diasporas in Western Europe, North America and Australia. Her talk (and subsequent discussion with students and researchers) offers insight into the understandings of one performer vis-à-vis music, nationalism and public life in Serbia during the 1990s. It is her personal and necessarily subjective account, mediated by the act of speaking biographically to an audience in Austria. She reflected on participating in the musical mainstream, while attempting to maintain artistic integrity and avoid political patronage in Milošević’s Serbia (an issue that tends to be in the foreground of research of the Serbian music industry of the 1990s). The rest of this text presents and contextualises excerpts of Mirković’s talk.

A Yugoslav performer and her audience in the 1980s

Dragana Mirković was born in Kasidol, near Požarevac in Eastern Serbia and rose to fame in the mid-1980s as part of the musical collective Južni vetar. Južni vetar was composed of three Belgrade-based producers and five singers from Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. The style of Južni vetar’s music was newly composed folk music, the bestselling musical genre in 1980s Yugoslavia, but the collective also experimented with more oriental sounds leading to marginalisation in many media outlets. Vidić Rasmussen writes that ‘Radio authorities spoke of the urgent need to “clean” radio programming of the trashy sounds that had accumulated since this music’s emergence in the market.’⁶

⁵ Baker, Catherine. 2006. The Politics of Performance: Transnationalism and its Limits in Former Yugoslav Popular Music, 1999-2004. *Ethnopolitics* 5(3), 275-93.

⁶ Vidić Rasmussen, Ljerka. 1996. *Southern Wind of Change: Style and the Politics of Identity in Prewar Yugoslavia*, in *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Slobin, Mark. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 103.

Despite such demands, Južni vetar enjoyed mass popularity among Yugoslavs with the group estimating they sold some 10 million records and cassettes.⁷ The five singers were diverse in terms of their backgrounds, ethnicity and generational cohort and might be interpreted as an unashamedly working class, pan-Yugoslav manifestation of brotherhood and unity. In the late 1980s, in a Yugoslav society ‘drifting away from its professed ideals, the Serbian/Bosnian project of Južni vetar appeared as a statement of unity’.⁸ The original Južni vetar collective collapsed with the breakup of the Yugoslav state, as some of the performers forced to leave Bosnia Herzegovina with the outbreak of war, but the original ensemble re-established itself in 2008 releasing a song titled ‘Stronger than ever’ (*Jači nego ikad*) professing in the chorus ‘Now we are as one again, now we are stronger than ever. The world is small, no one can ever separate us’.⁹

In introducing herself to the audience, Mirković referred to her upbringing as unabashedly Yugoslav.¹⁰

“I was born in Yugoslavia.... To live in Yugoslavia in the time that I remember, means peace, equality; nobody cared whether someone was Orthodox, Catholic, or of Muslim faith. That is how I was raised at home, by my parents and that is how they taught us in school.”

Referring to her rise to stardom in the 1980s, she stresses the trans-ethnic and transnational grounding of her career and that her overriding commitment was to her fan base in Yugoslavia and the wider Balkan region.

“Most important of all, this was among all peoples [narodi] in Yugoslavia, and even in Romania and Bulgaria too where they declared me to be a Balkan star [...] In the 1980s to be in the music business – singing, without any kind of influence from anyone – simply from the beginning I belonged to music and my fans. That is the most important thing I wish to stress about the 1980s.”

She maintains that she enjoyed absolute freedom in her profession during the decade, declaring that ‘everything depends on whether one is a quality character [*kvalitetna ličnost*], a quality singer, and how much the fans like you’. Her description gels with the claims of scholars like Hofman that stress the affective component of musical labour for Yugoslav show business [*estrada*] performers¹¹ who embody a range of social positionings ‘symbolising both a socialist woman and a capitalist entertainer, a working person and a “star”’.¹² As a performer in the *narodna* genre,¹³ she was arguably in a symbiotic relationship with a collective—the people in general terms and her more narrowly defined fan base.

⁷ Vidić Rasmussen, *Southern Wind of Change*, 106.

⁸ Vidić Rasmussen, *Southern Wind of Change*, 112.

⁹ *Sada smo k'o jedno opet / sad smo jači nego ikad / mali je svijet, ne može nas / rastaviti niko nikad*
¹⁰ Cf. Hofman, Ana. 2012. Lepa Brena: Repolitization of musical memories on Yugoslavia. *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ* 60(1), 21-32.

¹¹ Hofman, Ana. 2015. Music (as) Labour: Professional Musicianship, Affective Labour and Gender in Socialist Yugoslavia. *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24(1), 28-50.

¹² Hofman, Ana and Polona Sitar. 2016. *Buy me a silk skirt Mile! Celebrity culture, gender and social positioning in socialist Yugoslavia*, in *Social Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism*, edited by Archer, Rory / Duda, Igor and Paul Stubbs. Abingdon: Routledge, 156.

¹³ *Narodna* refers to the broad category of newly-composed folk music. See: Vidić Rasmussen, Ljerka. 1995. From Source to Commodity: Newly-composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia. *Popular Music* 14(2), 241-56.

Facing the 1990s: “A dark room in which you are suffocating”

The central topic of the lecture, reflecting on being a commercially successful musician in Milošević’s Serbia, was soon broached in the talk. ‘Maybe we should move to the main theme, that is the 1990s... uff!’ Despite being a major star in Serbia during the 1990s, Mirković’s memories of the decade are overwhelmingly negative. She presents personal privations against a broader ‘destruction of sociability’¹⁴ and the backdrop of a war—a war, as she notes, in which Serbia was officially not participating—while it was blindingly obvious to her that men of military age were being sent to the front to fight against those she considered to be their fellow countrymen and women.

“I was 21 years old when I experienced the biggest tragedy in my life. That was the breakup of my own country in the worst possible way—civil war [...]. I don’t know if you can imagine how it was then, at that time. Not everything was as accessible, open, media and that... Can you imagine how a young person of 21 years who just adored music, loved books, films, travelling, and suddenly end up, and I can freely say it, in absolute darkness? Life in those 1990s reminds me of life in a dark room, where you are suffocating... how long can that go on for. I was in Serbia, which officially was not at war—that is very important to say—however, believe me, there was not a big difference. We did not have enough food, electricity.... Secondly, and more importantly, I could feel it, I could see that they were coming for young men literally at their homes at night, as if they were kidnapping them and then leading them to war [...] I can say knowing the situation then, those young people did not want to go to war. Because Serbia ‘was not’ at war, officially, we lived ‘normally’—that is how it was presented. People went to work, singers sang, recorded—that is how it had to be. We had to continue. But everything was different. So different you simply cannot believe it. At the beginning I could not get a grip on it, how to get by in such a situation. Speaking as a singer, in showbusiness [estrada], there was no longer the freedom to work without being influenced... Since politics—and mafia—entered so deeply into all spheres of the country, it also entered the estrada... The consequences of this can be noticed today. Is really the worst thing that can happen to music. I consider that music is one of the most connecting things in the world, it is exceptionally humanistic [...].”

Dragana Mirković might be considered a counterpoint to Ceca in terms of her public image and private life (indeed she alluded to such a view in her talk, delicately but firmly disparaging the choice of a notable ‘colleague’ to insert herself into nationalist politics and criminal, paramilitary milieus). While vying with Ceca in terms of popularity and record sales during the 1990s, Mirković struck an alternative course regarding her orientation towards aggressive Serbian nationalism while still participating in the same Belgrade show business scene. Maintaining a modest ‘girl next door’ persona and aesthetics akin to Brenda Walsh of Beverly Hills 90210, Mirković, when confronted with aggressive nationalism in the public sphere, relied on the performance of a feminine naïveté to deflect violent behaviour. While a successful strategy to navigate the violent realignment of national and gender orders, it also rendered female performers like herself who were not publicly associated with ‘strong men’

¹⁴ Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*.

from the 1990s milieu of politics, paramilitaries and business, vulnerable in public settings. She recalled one such high-profile encounter in 1991 on the Serbian entertainment show 'Minimakovizija'. Before the live programme began to air, she recalled that a third chair was added to stage and the guests were joined by ultranationalist politician and paramilitary leader Vojislav Šešelj. Šešelj tiraded against Croatians in base terms as members of the studio audience seated behind him laughed like drains.

"It is hard to explain how I felt at that moment. Me, as somebody who grew up in a totally different time... the man who was sitting beside me, and again, a live show, I could not simply get up, at that moment how would that be perceived? Someone might interpret that as if I was against my own country. I sat there, the whole time, while that person talked about war. I did not want to hear anything like that or participate [in that discussion] ... and the way he spoke about it... you can see on YouTube how it was..., and the whole time I am thinking, should I get up? But someone will kill me on the street.... [laughs nervously]. No, thank god, nobody would kill me, and it turned out that the majority of the Serbian people were against that... They were such crazy times, complete craziness. Now when we are talking about it you might be like, why? But you cannot believe how those times were. One wrong word and I'm not saying you would lose your head, but you would simply be erased [from public life] as if erased by a rubber eraser."

In a publicly available 10-minute video clip of the programme,¹⁵ a visibly uncomfortable Mirković avoids eye contact with the presenter and other guests and deflects questions about whether she would drive to Croatia on holidays ('I don't have a driving license...' 'I will spend my holidays with my family in Požarevac...'). While not intervening to condemn or distance herself from the discussions taking place her objections are clear to individuals watching the footage retrospectively on YouTube as indicated by numerous viewers' comments.

"Zlaja: Most of all I feel sorry here for Mirković... you can see how the girl was so uncomfortable.
Udarni Radnik: True scum. It is making Dragana feel as sick as I feel.
DRAGANA I LOVE YOU ARE A GOD!
MrvaSarajevo: 6:10 – this is the only part worth watching in the clip. Clear evidence that Dragana was and remained true to her views and is not a sick mind like that disgusting Seselj. FAIR PLAY DRAGANA!"¹⁶

Reflecting on the way that a number of her estrada colleagues eagerly supported ethno-nationalist mobilisation in Serbia, Mirković maintains that this was not a majority—"most of us did not want to go along with that because we considered that we belonged to the people and not just to *one* people [*a ne samo jednom narodu*]." She reflected on her role as a performer as one that is imbued with responsibility vis-à-vis her audience.

"The only right way in the profession I am in.... well, you see, I have a lot of fans, you could even say an army of fans. If I choose some wrong direction,

¹⁵ Der Kommissar (User-Account): Šešelj - Zardjale kašike (minimaksovizija '91). *YouTube* (accessed: 26. May 2019).

¹⁶ Der Kommissar (User-Account): Šešelj - Zardjale kašike (minimaksovizija '91) (accessed : 26. May 2019).

automatically I would lead someone astray [zavešću nekoga], I mean, I would teach somebody something which is wrong and that would be terrible. I have a much greater responsibility, regardless that show-business seems, you know—tra-la-la; it is a greater responsibility, a much more serious job than it seems. In every job which is a public role, one has to take care of every step, of every word is uttered... That is how most of us saw things, thank God!"

Rejecting political patronage

Dragana Mirković described how for her and many colleagues, singing in the Yugoslav diaspora(s) in Western Europe and North America 'was our outlet', both in a financial and social sense. The abysmal economic situation in Serbia meant that earnings were greatly reduced and the wars of the 1990s interrupted the pan-Yugoslav folk music circuit of the 1980s. Performances in Germany, Austria and elsewhere secured earnings for singers while also offering a social space and buffer to gain respite from the deteriorated conditions in Serbia. It also offered an opportunity to meet with colleagues who were now physically separated by state borders and the violent ebbing of frontlines in Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia. Some of the Bosnian members of the Južni vetar collective and associated acts moved to Western Europe as refugees after 1992 and could regroup in Western European cities.

The showbusiness scene in rump Serbia was closely connected to politics according to Mirković. Furthermore, she states that she did not enjoy going out in Belgrade during the 1990s: "I was a voluntary prisoner in my own house because, to be honest, I was afraid." The fear she described was perhaps less connected to the increased in organised crime and high-profile mafia hits that punctuated life in Belgrade during the early 1990s and more related to pressures to conform to the dominant nationalist values that had pervaded the Serbian *estrada*. Detailing the politicisation of the showbusiness scene, she explained her own strategy when confronted by activists who encouraged her to join the ruling party, Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia. She recalls that her popularity made her a target for the regime. When confronted with pressure to join the party she responded by pretending she did not fully understand the offer, relying again upon performances of naïve femininity as a defensive strategy to remain external to direct politicisation while not challenging or opposing offers of patronage explicitly.

"I was offered by the largest party then, to enter it. The party that held everything, not only in politics but in business, and showbusiness too. It was said to me, 'you know, I got the million-dollar job [to invite you to join the SPS]' — It was all sweet, with a smile, and I am silent and waited. I laughed and responded with a smile. In those times a smile was ... some kind defensive weapon. When you smile it is as if you did not understand it, you even appear a bit stupid, but it does not matter..."

Following the offer which she politely refused, she focused on working in Germany and Switzerland for the next three months to avoid being confronted with another political offer by party activists. Recalling her career trajectory, she claims 'I have to admit that a couple of times I really fell in to depression. At some points I was banned from the television, and more generally in the 'media'.

Having seen how certain colleagues who were SPS or JUL¹⁷ members and close to the regime apparatus, she noted that ‘they had it so much easier, getting flats in the city centre.... So obvious that it is better for them. Why didn’t I do it...? I considered it, but could not do it The idea of it disgusted me.... And now, I am glad I didn’t.’

Reconstituting a transnational career trajectory and post-Yugoslav sociability in Austria

From the position of a long-term resident of Austria in 2015 speaking to a group of some 50 students and researchers, many of Yugoslav origins, Mirković evaluates her reluctance to be co-opted by the Serbian regime in the 1990s stressing that she would not be in a position to speak honestly and openly with the audience had she then acquiesced.

“I can really say, with pride... I said ‘no’ then.... I can go everywhere now—you can pose any question to me; I am not afraid of any question which is proof that I know what I did, and I do not have to be worried about it. I live in Austria, and my life, it looks like that nice one I mentioned from the 1980s. I am blessed. Again, I live life without external influences [political interference] ... They [forces from the music industry who were against her] did not succeed in destroying me [...] My response, then ‘no’—then when it was needed, was really the right answer, because now I live in a country where probably that would be a huge minus, if I had behaved differently back then. Like for other people it was a minus, they had problems, they were even banned from entering the country [Austria] and so on. I showed myself as somebody who did not want to be soiled [isprljan—i.e. by nationalist politics], not as a person and not as somebody who has the best job in the world and that is music. So, I say it again, perhaps that is some kind of reward because to live again like I had earlier, happily, unstressed, without feeling under pressure—like in the 1980s, I live like that now...”

Conclusion

This contribution has sought to present some of the issues that Dragana Mirković addressed during a public talk and contextualise them with reference to scholarly discussions of pop-folk music in the Balkans as well as the ambivalent role of female performers in late-socialism and the immediate postsocialist era.

The act of inviting a well-known performer to speak in an academic context as a witness and participant in the former Yugoslav political economy of show business probably brings up more questions than it answers. To conclude I pose some of the questions the encounter with Dragana Mirković raised for me and colleagues who organised and attended the event.

- In academic discussions, in Area Studies of the Balkans and beyond, who is permitted to speak and in what terms? Might it be the case that hearing accounts from showbusiness personalities has scholarly value and can reveal perspectives that tend to be absent from the witnesses

¹⁷ *Jugoslovenska Levica* (JUL) was a party formed in 1994 by Mirjana Marković, wife of Milošević, which cooperated closely with the SPS and attracted several high-profile members of the *estrada*.

who are called on to speak in academic settings? (Typically, politicians, diplomats and activists from the NGO sector).¹⁸

- Are such interventions better reported as primary sources or contextualised critically, problematised and interrogated? How can knowing silences and implicit references to individuals and events expressed in these kinds of discussion by public figures be accounted for?
- In scholarly discussions of 'dealing with the past', in which ways can researchers better integrate the experiences and accounts of public figures who remain outside of the constructed dichotomies of engaged liberal democrats and normative nationalists (i.e. 'first' and 'other' Serbia)?
- How might performers, producers and consumers of music (in Serbia and elsewhere) be included in the research process?
- How do semi-public discussions with musical performers further our understanding of phenomena like the music industry, the relationship between audiences and performers, and the subjectivity of individual performers who are routinely understood as symbolic reference points in both ethnonationalist discourse and narratives of social transformations and urban (self-) perceptions in the former Yugoslav region?

Lastly, I wish to extend thanks to Dragana Mirković for speaking candidly at the University of Graz, to Armina Galijaš and colleagues at the CSEES for facilitating the talk, and Krisztina Rácz who acted as interpreter for Dragana Mirković and the audience.

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¹⁸ Through see a number of biographies and autobiographies by popular stars - for example: Zmijanac, Vesna. 2000. *Kad zamirišu jorgovani: Pokušaj autobiografije*. Beograd: Evro, 2000; Katarina, Olivera. *Aristokratsko stopalo*. Beograd: Karić fondacija; Marković, Dragan. 2011. *Knjiga o Silvani*. Beograd: V.B.Z; Luković, Petar. 1989. *Bolja prošlost: prizori iz muzičkog života Jugoslavije 1940-1989*. Beograd: Mladost.

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