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Lepa Brena: Repolitization of Musical Memories on Yugoslavia

Article focuses on politically relevant aspects of practices of remembering socialism in post-Yugoslav context and offers an approach to memory that involves considering not only what is remembered and how, but also what are the implications of these remembrances, i.e. what is the potential of memory to support (or de-legitimize) political causes and enhance (or impede) civic participation. Looking at the example of Lepa Brena's public persona and her concerts during 2009, it examines the active usage of the Yugoslav past and highlights the significant capacity of music in that process. Through the lenses of the so-called personalized historical narrativity, the attention is given to the expression, shape and constraint of emotions associated with Yugoslav popular music and its social, cultural and political consequences within the post-Yugoslav societies.

Key words:

Lepa Brena, Yugoslav past, newly-composed folk music

Scholars focusing on post-Yugoslav music industries have already pointed to a strong capacity of popular music in narrations, embodiments and interpretations of the Yugoslav past.¹ They observed the ways Yugoslav musical past poses a critical challenge to using music in the demarcation of new national borders – by contributing to the wider discursive strategies the ethnification and nationalization of cultural landscapes in post-Yugoslav context are being resisted.² However, to a large extent, making reference to the shared musical legacy was put in the framework of the mass-production of cultural memories as the so-called “*pop(ular) Yugonostalgia*” (Šabec 2006, 58). Links between Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav musical productions have been mainly discussed through a neo-liberal prism of the free

¹ Pettan 1998; Gordy 1999; Mijatović 2003, Jansen 2005, Pogačar 2006, Baker 2010.

² See Jansen 2005 and Baker 2010.

market economy, and productions and demands of the entertainment industry.³ Revitalizing the Yugoslav musical past has been largely seen as manipulation with the nostalgia and people's emotional attachments to the past, while "transnationalism" promoted in that way as having primarily commercial background. Post-Yugoslav musical networking and reestablishing of musical activities across new political borders was interpreted as an ahistorical and decontextualized representation of the past, which prevents reflection on the political responsibility for the Yugoslav wars (Volčič 2007b, 34) and is therefore a threat to the "democratic perspectives" of the newly-founded countries.

Therefore, those interpretations rather avoid assigning any "real" political potential to the active usages of the Yugoslav musical production, even though many scholars have noticed their ambivalent micro-political meaning.⁴ This stance is also visible in the dominant scholarly discourses, which often hesitate to give this phenomenon any political⁵ agency or potentials in the post-Yugoslav present and future (Kurtović 2011,4).

By focusing on Lepa Brena's "return tour" in the ex-Yugoslav countries and concerts during 2009 in Zagreb and Sarajevo, this article tries to investigate the contested meanings and potentials of the shared musical legacy. In this respect, the attention will be given to the expression, shape and constraint of emotions associated with the Yugoslav popular music and its social, cultural and political consequences within the post-Yugoslav societies.⁶ The idea is to show, through the lenses of the so-called personalized historical narrativity, Lepa Brena's public appearances as strategies of navigation through intersected discourses of Yugoslav past, conflict, reconciliation, Europeanization, debates on nationalism, balkanism, multiculturalism, and its perception by her audience and wider public.⁷ Her public persona will be examined as that specific embodiment of the historical experience, which enables emotional continuity of the past that derives predominantly from the sentimental attachments to her music.

³ In the so-called post-socialist countries it was expected that the market-driven sphere like music industry would suddenly become free of content-structuring ideological assumptions based on cultural producers' *habiti* (Kellner 1995), since it was believed that the explicit connection of cultural production with ideology was typical of socialism. In contrast, popular culture in Yugoslavia had a constitutive significance for the cultural politics and still in post-Yugoslav context defines and supports the un/acceptable discourses. Therefore, despite major official attempts to achieve the opposite, the contemporary post-Yugoslav music market cannot be conceptualized without the Yugoslav legacies.

⁴ See Baker 2010, 171 or Petrović (in manuscript).

⁵ Where politics is broadly understood as an active and responsible civic participation.

⁶ The scope of this article does not permit putting more focus on extremely important differences in these perceptions in each of post-Yugoslav societies.

⁷ The core of the material consists of Brena's statements about her concerts and is therefore based on the so-called "journalist discourses" – newspaper articles, interviews and audience's reactions and comments. Her personal accounts are seen as a part of the strategies of self-positioning she used strategically, mediated and transformed in accordance with the current social expectations and norms.

“We are Brena’s, Brena is ours” (Mi smo Brenini, Brena je naša)⁸

Today, we all love Brena as a symbol of the time when everyone was happy, careless, tall and blond, the same as her.
(<http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendId=327025537&blogId=409710074>)

The association of Lepa Brena with Yugoslavia is more than explicit. Brena represented a Yugoslav mainstream culture policy project and was in fact the biggest Yugoslav and the first big Balkan star. Her public persona embodied multicultural Yugoslavia in all aspects of her public appearances: Fahreta Jahić was born on 20th of October 1960 in the Bosnian town of Tuzla and grew up in Brčko in a working-class family. After high school, she moved to Novi Sad and then to Belgrade to study, where she eventually got married to Slobodan Živojinović, a famous tennis player. According to Milena Dragičević-Šešić, she was the first folk music singer whose career rested upon the strategies of the popular music industry which are typical in genres such as garage rock or disco (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 147). Professionals involved in the project were prominent Yugoslav composers, songwriters and producers. The repertoire was mainly based on newly-composed folk music (NCFM),⁹ but also included elements of different genres of the so-called “entertainment music,”¹⁰ rock, samba and tango. Her discography includes several patriotic songs, which became extremely popular (*Živela Jugoslavija* from the album from 1985 and *Jugoslovenka* from 1988). The Lepa Brena project managed to mobilize wider audience that consisted of people who did not particularly consume such music before: in 1985, Brena and her band *Slatki greh* (“The sweet sin”) were the first performers of NCFM to appear in the Sava Centar hall, which was reserved for more “prominent” musical genres (mostly classical music and alternative musical genres). She participated twice in the Yugoslav competition for the Eurovision song contest. Besides, in contrast to the other folk performers, who were widely popular but who mainly performed in the smaller concert halls and clubs (particularly in Slovenia and Croatia), she held concerts in the biggest arenas across Yugoslavia, as no performer of this genre has ever done before. During her career, she recorded 18 albums, shot 5 movies and 2 TV shows, and became the most popular public figure in Yugoslavia and the first one having a Barbie Doll made after her. As a symbol of socialist Yugoslavia, she opened the Winter Olympic games in Sarajevo in 1984, the biggest sport event ever organized in the Balkans. She was also extremely popular in other Balkan countries. Her 1984 concert in Temišvara exceeded all expecta-

⁸ In concerts, the audience usually greeted Brena with this slogan (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 156), a variation of the slogan used for Tito: *We are Tito’s, Tito is ours*.

⁹ NCFM is the acronym of the English translation of the term *novokomponovana narodna muzika* – newly-composed folk music – introduced by Ljerka Vidić Rasmussen (2002, xviii).

¹⁰ Literary translation of the term *zabavna muzika*, equivalent to the light pop or pop-rock style.

tions and instead of anticipated 30.000, had 60.000 fans attending. It was then announced a high-risk public event and guarded by police. She ended her tour in Bulgaria in 1990 with the concert in the Levski Stadium in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria in front of 100.000 people. This show was not only seen as just extraordinary music performance but also a political event *par excellence*. In these countries, Brena and her music served as a specific “window” to the west and a sign of the level of liberalization and democratization. In 2008, after eight years of absence, Brena announced her big return to the stage with a new album, *Uđi slobodno* (“Just come in”), which was sold in 1,900,000 copies.

The Last “Yugoslavian”?

During the promotion of the ex-YU 2009 tour and concerts in Ljubljana, Sarajevo and Zagreb (but also Sofia, Temishvara and Tirana), Brena tried to escape her image of the Yugoslav star and rarely expressed any kind of longing for the past. In her interviews to different media, reference to Yugoslavia has always been indirect:

In the 1960s we (as the family) were the happiest family on the world, even though we lived in an apartment not bigger than my present bathroom. I had parents who loved me, I traveled and I was the happiest girl in the world.

She usually avoided conversation about socialism and, particularly at the level of discourse, tried not to use terms such as socialist or Yugoslav, but more neutral phrases such as “former times,” “our time,” “old times.” She was particularly careful not to give any reason her statements to be interpreted as Yugonostalgic and also tried to distance herself from expressing any political or engaged stance, particularly explicit patriotism or nationalism:

You know, I loved Yugoslavia like a German loves Germany or a Japanese loves Japan. I didn’t think that this was a kind of an exaggerated love. There is a positive and negative nationalism. That was the love, which everyone should have for their own country. This kind of love I have for Yugoslavia. (<http://www.delo.si/clanek/78001>)

Being recognized as one of the main symbols of Yugoslavia, she attempted to reclaim her association with the political system:

To repeat once again: I am not a fanatic Yugoslavian longing for the old Yugoslavia. However, I’m not saying that I’m not sorry because it broke up, since the EU is made on the same principles and is obviously functioning.

Comparing Yugoslavia with the EU enabled her to legitimize her stance on Yugoslavia as a good project. She never explicitly talked about the rehabilitation of the “former” cultural space, but expressed longing for the joint Yugoslav musical market which ceased to exist with the break up of the country. She emphasized that she wanted to be present again in the former Yugoslav markets, but not for personal

financial gain. Her career, she maintains, was interrupted by the Yugoslav wars and her main goal was to take off where she once stopped and to show that the end of Yugoslavia did not mean the end of Lepa Brena. She foregrounded her personal motives and reasons for “comeback” to the scene as spiritual, emotional and intimate nature and a specific personal rehabilitation. By presenting new songs, she wanted to prove that she, no matter being middle-age woman, could still sing and be active as a performer. Singing again in front of the fans would have great emotional and transformative potential not for the audience, but primary for Brena itself.

Still, the most sensitive was a conversation about her songs that explicitly referred to Yugoslavia or socialism. When asked what the lyrics of the song *Jugoslovenka*¹¹ meant to her today she replied:

This is a love song and it is not *important* if you sing it to the country in which you, your mother or your pet lives. The most important thing is that ‘pure emotion.’ That is what people miss. Because of that, old songs return, that’s why we remember schlagers.
(<http://www.delo.si/clanek/77509>)

Brena employed same strategy during the concerts and each of them had its own specificities: in Sarajevo, after a 3 hour concert, the audience had been calling Brena to sing *Jugoslovenka* for 10 minutes, what she finally did after much hesitation. *Jugoslovenka*, on the other hand, was not performed at all in front of 15.000 people in the Zagreb Arena concert hall. She also decided not to sing *Mile voli disko* (“Mile likes disco”) and *Čačak* because of the “problematic” lyrics and melodies directly referring to Serbia (*Šumadija*), which could be recognized as “nationalistic.” She did not want to irritate people, Brena maintains, but to put more emphasis on the songs from her latest CD.

This kind of talk indicates that she avoided exposing the nostalgic attitude which she obviously saw as inappropriate and (maybe) potentially harmful for public perception of her and her career in general.¹² In this respect she stressed that her career was independent from any political system; she never mentioned Yugoslavia as a political entity, Tito or “the socialist past,” but rather referred to it just as a shared geographical and cultural space. She presented her attitude toward the Yugoslav past as longing for the time marked by peacefulness, stability, and traveling in light of the current post-socialist insecurity, volatile social climate and restriction

¹¹ The lyrics of the refrain: “My eyes are the Adriatic Sea, my hair is Pannonian wheat, my sister is my Slavic soul, I am a Yugoslavian woman” (*Oči su mi more jadransko, kose su mi klasje panonsko, sestra mi je duša slovenska, ja sam Jugoslovenka*).

¹² As the Gerghens point out, an “active negotiation over narrative is especially invited when the individual is asked to justify his or her behavior, that is, when one has acted disagreeably with respect to common frames of understanding” (Gergen and Gergen 1997, 177).

in mobility. She tried hard to avoid any politization of her words and any connection with the socialist past that can have political connotations.¹³

For/Against Lepa Brena

Despite those attempts, her tour nevertheless became a highly politicized event. The concerts in Zagreb and Sarajevo, in particular, appeared the most problematic and controversial musical happenings. The Croatian associations of military veterans (*Braniteljske udruge*) boycotted the concert with a protest in the Zagreb main square and in front of the concert hall, and started the petition against the concert which could be signed on several locations. At least two Facebook groups with 6000 to 8000 members were founded against her concert activities in Croatia and Bosnia. The events caused many public debates, graffiti, family conflicts, and even two bomb threats. Political parties such as the Social-democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Socijaldemokratska unija BiH) – Sarajevo canton, appealed for a legal act that would prevent the concert from taking place.¹⁴ In general, all these actors proclaimed listening to her music and going to the Brena's concert an unpatriotic act,¹⁵ particularly considering the interethnic conflict and issues related to the moral legitimacies of the conflicting parties in the Yugoslav wars.

However, the stances of the “ordinary people” presented quite a different picture.¹⁶ Even though they often expressed radically opposite stances toward Brena's concerts and public persona in general, their reactions opened a space for mediation between various (and contested) interpretations of the past, particularly for the narratives potentially subversive in the mainstream discourses. The analyzed comments of the people involved in debate show the ways Brena's concerts were

¹³ As Velikonja points out, the very emphasis on non-political nature of the positive recollection of the Yugoslav past betrays the fact that these statements actually have the potential to be read as political (Velikonja in Kurtović 2011, 4).

¹⁴ The same happened in 2011 in March, when Brena planned a humanitarian concert in Croatian town of Osijek, where the concert caused vigorous public and political debate (in the Croatian Parliament as well) and was eventually banned. According to Brena, she had the best intentions but the concert had taken on a political dimension in which she did not want to participate (<http://www.lepa-brena.net/>).

¹⁵ Yugonostalgia is generally considered unpatriotic and strongly opposed by other nostalgic discourses about national unity and time when the county got independence (Petrović, in manuscript).

¹⁶ In the course of the research I analyzed the debates on forums of three main journals in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, *Delo*, *Jutarnji list*, and *Oslobođenje*. I investigated the communication between users and singled out the main topics of debate, analyzing more than 720 posted comments related to Lepa Brena's concerts. It is important to emphasize that people involved in these interactions did not have a strictly defined (ethnic, class, gender, political, etc.) position, but were *users* who expressed their individual opinions regarding the concerts. Thus, the comments can hardly be seen as individual responses *per se*, but rather as social practices of sharing which became the vehicle of various interconnected discourses and negotiations.

utilized to interpret the realities of the postwar life in ex-Yugoslav countries, through themes such as war, nationalism, profiteering, corruption and various sorts of chauvinism. Her music was predominantly used as a strategy of reconciliation and mediation in the post-Yugoslav conflict. Namely, many people (*users*) expressed the stance that the painful memories of the war should be left behind as a kind of victory of the future over the past:

It set young people free from the ballast of the past. Lepa Brena's concert is a victory of common sense over hatred, nationalism, chauvinism, primitivism and everything that resulted from the war.
(http://www.gorila.hr/go/rasplakana-brena-odusevila-arenu-branitelj-sramota-je-da-je-pjevala-na-sv-antu_slobodnadalmacija_hr).

Narratives of the tolerance, "good old values," and free travel as the benefits of the socialist era were put in the framework of universal democratic values:

This proves that "peace" is finally returning to the territory of Yugoslavia, that hatred is slowly disappearing, that a man is a man, regardless of the color of his skin, citizenship or religion. There will always be a few fools, as in the past, let them spread hatred, their brain is already fried anyway.
(http://www.gorila.hr/go/rasplakana-brena-odusevila-arenu-branitelj-sramota-je-da-je-pjevala-na-sv-antu_slobodnadalmacija_hr).

Particularly the concert in Zagreb was seen as a specific way of democratization and liberalization of the musical market and public culture in general. For the debate participants, the Yugoslav musical production was generally perceived as being of better quality both in terms of music and production. Its multicultural character was emphasized as extremely important attribute, which made it more creative and artistic in comparison to the current national music productions. The visibility of Brena's music was recognized as a specific "freedom" and subversive act against "univocal" official ethnic discourses. Her concert was discursively framed together with other democratic legacies such as minority or gay rights:¹⁷

Zagreb became a truly modern, democratic and cosmopolitan city. Gay parade on Friday, monkfish Brena on Saturday, face it, you're moving on. And it should be small, benighted, homophobic and fascist city?

I don't understand what you wanted to say with this whether you were just being ironic? and perhaps one day you will understand (and not just you) what a free society means ..
(http://arhiva.gorila.hr/go/rasplakana-brena-odusevila-arenu-branitelj-sramota-je-da-je-pjevala-na-sv-antu_slobodnadalmacija_hr)

¹⁷ As Marijana Mitrović writes, gay and lesbian activist groups accept neofolk (to use her terminology) and its potential to act subversively with regard to patriarchal moral (Mitrović 2011, 145).

The comments reflected complex dynamics between the socialist past and the post-socialist present marked by an array of interconnected discourses of democratization, modernization, and nostalgias. The discussion transformed into arguments as to whose society was more multicultural, more open or more democratic. Discourses of Yugoslav transnationalism/multiculturality and mobility were thus placed in the broader frame of Europeanization discourses, which also revealed the intentions to legitimize new links with the past and Yugoslav legacy.

Although I agree that listening to (Serbian) folk genres cannot always be seen as a political act or an act of ethnic reconciliation (Baker 2010, 207), in the case of Brena's concerts "simply enjoying music" transformed into the political act par excellence.¹⁸ People who do listen to Brena underlined in their statements that they do not see attending the concert a political statement. Still, Brena's public perception, the politics of sentiments attached to her music and its association with Yugoslavia, make this act of listening *unintentionally* subversive (Bowman 2008, 109, 110). And moreover since her music was associated with the folk music genre, her tour gained a variety of contested paradoxical political employments.

Yugoslav Past and the Politics of Genre

The discourses of transnationality of Yugoslav musical scene and its strong market potential were predominantly built on the genre of Yugoslav "entertainment music" and particularly Yugoslav rock. People usually emphasize that, after the English and American scenes, the Yugoslav rock scene was the third best in the world. The folk music production, on the contrary, was not seen a part of Yugoslav legacy, but more as an "eastern product" of the so-called "Yugoslav orient" (Serbia, Bosnia and Macedonia).¹⁹ In "western" Republics it was very often perceived as a foreign imposition of the oriental, Balkan part of the socialist Yugoslavia. Recognized as a "trivial" and "frivolous" mass-culture genre, it often represented the testing ground for extensive debates on negative values, as the difference between elite and the mass-produced musical objects.²⁰ During socialism, NCFM was placed on the margins of both the official and the popular culture (the established genres of popular music), thus being both mainstream and alternative at the same time. It represented a fundamentally ambiguous cultural product: rooted the traditional folk

¹⁸ It is particularly important to emphasize that listening to various performers of this genre can be interpreted the same way.

¹⁹ Donna Buchanan talks about dominant narratives in Croatia about NCFM as associated with a Yugoslav Orient (Buchanan 2007, 42).

²⁰ This genre of music owns its popularity to the liberalization of the musical market in the 1960s, by spreading the network of local radio-stations and the growth of the Yugoslav record industry. During socialism, it was criticized as a commodified musical style, as artistically "not good enough." Neither being "authentic" folk music nor an already established genre of the western popular music, but "the hybrid creation which retained some rural symbolism and ambience, folk music appropriated for the pop market" (Vidić Rasmussen 2002:xix), NCFM was seen as a controversial phenomenon and a main object of the complex dynamics of ideological and aesthetic prejudices.

music and westernized;²¹ national and transnational; trivial, “frivolous,” “enjoyable” mass-consumption product, and highly politicized cultural practice. In Yugoslavia, and particularly in post-Yugoslav time, this music (and the ones which derive from it) exceed the naive binarism of formative and subversive – at the same time it embraces and resists the norms and avoids stressing one side over the other.

In Brena’s case, the fact that her music was associated with the Yugoslav past assigned an additional potential to NCFM to be used as a cosmopolitan and multicultural genre in rebellion against national culture politics. While right-wing politicians and war veterans protested against the concert as the core symbol of the “other” – enemy’s culture,²² the audience perceived it as a shared musical form, a practice that embodied their everyday cultural consumption in Yugoslavia.

And how was that possible? As mentioned, Brena gained legitimization through public/official culture politics and therefore placed folk music in a different context, giving it new notions and separating it from typical “narodnjaci.” She was the first NCFM performer who introduced a patriotic content in her songs (before any attempts to make patriotic folk song were seen as problematic),²³ performed in arenas – everything that was not possible for folk stars before her. She was one of the most important Yugoslavian entertainment industry export product in the East, and a mark of successfulness of Yugoslav liberal-socialist project, being the first Yugoslav star who made successful concerts abroad (much more successful than famous *Bjelo Dugme* had). In that way, intersection of Brena’s public persona, her musical (self)representations and (class, ethnic, gender and other) subjectifications, as well as active public utilization of all these aspects unravels a complex relationship between emotional, social and political attachments with the Yugoslav past. Her exceptional personal and musical biography calls for more nuanced and dynamic interpretations of NCFM and its performers in relation to musical memories on Yugoslavia. Brena herself is certainly a specific case and deserves to be treated accordingly; however, her example just brings to light whole range of specificities which are necessary to be dealt with when talk about this genre – its performers cannot be seen as homogeneous and addressed through the same lenses since their music, public appearances and (self) representations differ.

²¹ Some scholars have recognized the authenticity of this genre precisely in its hybridity, since it was not based on the simple imitation of the western genres but represented the autochthonous product of the mass culture and a specifically regional phenomenon (Dragičević-Šešić 1994:23; Povrzović in Vidić Rasmussen 2002, xviii).

²² I tend to disagree with the readings of NCFM as a symbol of ‘otherness’ in Croatian society or as the imposition of socialist Yugoslavia. Many data (including archival) confirm that this music was not only recorded and produced by production houses, but also widely listened to in the ‘western parts’ of Yugoslavia.

²³ The case of Toma Zdravković and Silvana Armenulić and songs *Stari, stari* (“Oldman, oldman”) and *Jugo moja jugo* (“Yugoslavia, my Yugoslavia”) (Hofman 2011, 623).

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Ана Хофман

Лепа Брена: Реполитизација музичких успомена на Југославију

Чланак се осврће на политички релевантне аспекте сећања на социјализам у пост-Југословенском контексту кроз приступ који не подразумева анализу самог процеса и предмета сећања, већ указује на могуће последице тих сећања и њихов потенцијал у политичкој легитимизацији (или де-легитимизацији). На примеру „повратничке турнеје“ Лепе Брене и њених концерата у току 2009. године, испитује активну политичку употребу југословенске музичке прошлости. Бренина јавна личност и њене стратегије (само)репрезентације посматране су кроз призму тзв. индивидуалног историјског наратива који омогућава поглед у облик, изражавање и спутавање емоција повезаних са југословенском популарном музиком и њихових социјалних, културних и политичких последица у пост-југословенским друштвима. Рад се посебно осврће на жанр новокомпоноване народне музике (перцепциране као производа „југословенског орјента“) и њених потенцијала у интерпретацији југословенске прошлости. Циљ је да се покаже како је у случају Лепе Брене, ова музика добила додатни потенцијал, али и да се укаже на једностраност посматрања овог жанра и његових представника као хомогене категорије и истакне важност изнијансиранијих разматрања различитости између самих извођача и њихове музике.

Кључне речи:

Лепа Брена,
Југославија,
политизација
прошлости,
новокомпонована
народна музика