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## TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **Lexicon of a Semi-Imaginary Yugoslavia**

by [Uffe Andersen](#)

20 June 2011

*Remembering the tastes and other pleasures of a country that fell apart 20 years ago.*

*Twenty years ago on 25 June, Slovenia and Croatia each declared independence, the first of Yugoslavia's republics to break away from the central state. In the coming years war and impoverishment ravaged much of the country as the other republics followed suit. As elsewhere in the newly democratic countries of Europe, nostalgia for the past soon took hold in the former Yugoslavia, which people remembered, or imagined, as the most prosperous and freest of Europe's communist states.*

*This review essay originally appeared on 17 February 2005.*

BELGRADE | Last year's "Day of the Republic," an old Yugoslav holiday, saw the promotion at the Belgrade Center for Cultural Decontamination of a most curious lexicon – a lexicon with entries such as *Djecja pasteta*, *Cockta*, *Ko to tamo peva?*, *Otpisani* or *Bijelo dugme*.

If these don't mean anything to you, you're probably under 30 or not from the former Yugoslavia, or both. To those living in the successor republics, these and other entries in this bible of Yugonostalgia suggest that Yugoslavia is still very much alive – if only in the minds of its former citizens.

And while this book may appear to be just another expression of the nostalgia that has swept through all former communist countries, the former Yugoslavia seems to have found its "third way" much as it did before 1991, when it wasn't yet "former."

"It sounds like Coca-Cola, but it's not," Dragan Mileusinovic says as he pours the fizzy reddish-brown beverage.

It not only sounds like Coke, it looks like it too. But really, *Cockta* is a much more fitting drink to accompany an interview with Mileusinovic and the other authors of the *Lexicon of Yugoslav Mythology*.

But where the unique taste of *Cockta* is easily explained – the basic ingredient was and is rose hip – it's so complicated to explain what made up the unique flavor of the Yugoslav experience that a handful of Croatian and Serbian editors, helped by dozens of authors from all over the former Yugoslavia, spent 15 years describing and illustrating it.



An advertisement for Cockta

it in the past,” Serdarevic says.

The result is the *Lexicon of Yugoslav Mythology*, a massive tome of almost 500 pages. The cover features a blue, white, and red band with a five-pointed red star in the middle, a paraphrase of the old Yugoslav flag.

One of the two designers of the lexicon, Zeljko Serdarevic, a Croat, explains that the way the successor states relate to this flag is indicative of how they relate to Yugoslavia as such. “In Serbia, no one felt it necessary to remove the flag completely from everything. But in Croatia, the Yugoslav flag is an enormous taboo, and after the war in the '90s, the star was removed from all public places.”

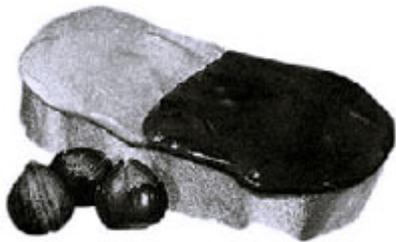
#### EVERYDAY MYTHOLOGY

Some countries have rewritten the history of Yugoslavia to better fit their own mythology, while others expunged it and started from a “year zero.” In this way, the successor states have revised and deleted their citizens’ personal pasts – a misdeed that *Yugoslav Mythology* tries to amend, according to the preface, by asking people, “how can you just cross these things out and claim that they were never part of your life?”

“My mother, for example, will tell you, ‘no, never in my life have I bought a Serbian magazine’ – even though I grew up in a home that always had a few Serbian magazines lying around. She’d also never use the Serbian word for coffee anymore, though people from my native Split always used the Serbian version, *kafa*, rather than *kava* as in the rest of Croatia. But no, not any more. Not only will they no longer use the word, they will claim they’d never used

The focus of *Yugoslav Mythology* is cultural rather than political: the everyday lives of ordinary Yugoslavs between 1943 and 1991. An example:

*Eurokrem: The first Yugoslav chocolate spread, made on an Italian license and followed by bombastic marketing. ... In itself, this legendary palatal triumph united what not only in appearance but in fact was irreconcilable: the parental demand for healthy nutrition and the children’s wish for genuine, sweet delight. It was spread on bread or swallowed with a spoon, it was black, white or mixed, and all the Kinderlade and Nutellas of this world will never so much as approach this Mount Everest of gastronomical joy. The only question we ask ourselves is, do you know anyone who managed to spread it the way it looks in the ad: half white, half black?*



Eurokrem

The book doesn’t pretend to be complete, nor is it necessarily strictly factual. Take the text about Jajce, an almost mythical town in Bosnia where Tito’s partisans re-founded Yugoslavia in 1943. The town has a waterfall 27 meters high, but the excellent entry on Jajce claims it’s 45 meters, according to the contributor’s memory of it as “huge.” Serdarevic says this might be corrected in a future edition but then again, maybe it won’t – since the book “is precisely about mythology and not about facts.”

This is also one of the reasons why Serdarevic disagrees with reviewers of the book who suggested that the “mythology” of the title be replaced by the word which seems unavoidable when talking about history here: Yugo­nostalgia.

#### LONGING FOR THE PAST, YUGO-STYLE

Yugonostalgia corresponds to what Germans call “Ostalgie”: the phenomenon that people fondly remember the socialist state in which they lived before it collapsed under its internal contradictions. Such nostalgia has become part of consumer culture all over the former communist bloc. Hungarian rubber shoes, Polish soft drinks, and LPs from all countries are examples of products that have again become popular in the countries where they originated. But today, they’re sought after not for lack of alternatives but as one

of countless choices in a free market.

A great deal of this trend is moved by irony. Another driving force behind the longing for the past is the social security and certainty of the socialist systems. Many people feel that the changes of 1989 and 1991 have mainly yielded instability, unemployment, and social division.

But Vladimir Arsenijevic, a Serbian writer and publisher and one of the editors of the lexicon, thinks that Yugonostalgia runs deeper than the rather shallow, consumerist version in other former communist countries. He points at the lexicon with all its entries, “and so much still to be excavated that we hope to come out with a second, enlarged edition.” He also rejects the idea that this has to do with irony.

Everywhere in the ex-Yugoslav republics the country’s lifetime president, Josip Broz Tito, seems to impersonate the Yugoslavia that many people remember in a positive light. Accordingly, everywhere associations have been founded to honor Tito’s memory; people flock to his grave in Belgrade and his birthplace of Kumrovec in Croatia. And when the authorities in Sarajevo wanted to rename the main street after the late Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegovic, a public uproar forced the municipal administration to keep its current name, Titova.

In places like Bosnia, much of Tito’s appeal may stem from the fact that people are going through some very hard times indeed: “The young are turning to Tito because he personified prosperity,” a member of the Bosnian Association of Josip Broz Tito told TOL last year. But public opinion in Croatia shows that there’s much more than low living standards behind Tito’s and Yugoslavia’s popularity.

Why, for example, despite close to 15 years of anti-Yugoslav campaigning from Croatian authorities, do Croats still regard Tito as the greatest Croat in history? (In a poll by the Croatian weekly *Nacional* less than a year ago, 8,000 people chose among 100 candidates. Tito received over 2,000 votes.) Why, when Croatian Television asked viewers whether socialism or capitalism was better and more fair, did 92 percent opt for socialism – even though Croatia is now firmly on its way to the European Union?

Teofil Pancic, a political commentator with the Serbian weekly *Vreme*, believes that the figures would be more or less the same in Serbia. “We wish for the best from both worlds: from capitalism, freedom of speech and thought, multiparty system, etc. And from socialism a steady job, an almost free flat, etc. And on the way to the EU, people feel as if a stranger has come to their house to demand that they act according to a completely new set of rules.” They’d say, “Oh, no, I want my old, rotten rules. Somehow I managed with them, and who knows whether I can deal with these new ones.”

Pancic agrees with the two editors of *Yugoslav Mythology* that the remembrance of Yugoslavia is not only stronger but qualitatively different from other nostalgias.

“For East Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, etc. a lot was worse before 1989: they lived poorly, had no freedoms, couldn’t leave their country without special permission. We, on the other hand, traveled wherever we wanted – where now we have to get a visa for almost everywhere. Concerning living standards, we used to say that we had everything whereas *they* basically had nothing.

“Then *we* had this war – whereas *they* experienced a kind of normalization of their lives. For the Hungarians, for example, every year since 1989 has been better than the previous – while every year for people in the former Yugoslavia, apart perhaps from Slovenes, has been worse.”

Pancic believes that under such conditions it is only to be expected that people long for “good old socialist Yugoslavia” – though he has criticized such thinking in *Vreme*. He says that Yugoslavia was a safe place not because it was a socialist country, but because it was a country.

“I would like people to free themselves from this undefined nostalgia and find out what, concretely, was good and what was bad about Yugoslavia. If one knows what was good about the past – and the present – then one knows what to wish for from the future. But if not, then one will easily fall victim to the first demagogue, as we see in Serbia where demagogues are plentiful.”

There is, however, no unambiguous answer to “what was good and what bad,” Pancic admits. Different generations had very different experiences with Yugoslav socialism. Today, by contrast, former Yugoslavia is “a society that’s stuck between ethnic wars and mafocracy. It’s no longer socialism, and not capitalism either. No one knows what it is, but everyone knows that it stinks.”

The lexicon, then, is a corrective to a lie created by the nationalists in the 1990s: that the life Yugoslavs lived together was bad and dark, and that only Yugoslavia’s demise opened the way for a free society.

Since Pancic sees the lexicon as a necessary form of Yugonostalgia, he at once agreed when the editors asked permission to reprint two of his articles from *Vreme*.

But Serdarevic also admits that the editors might be looking at socialism through rose-tinted glasses. He acknowledges that the lexicon falls prey to some of the vices of nostalgia:

“Most of the authors were born in the '60s and they remember Yugoslavia through their childhoods, which came during an economically stable time: mom and dad had nice wages, a new car, could afford summer and winter holidays, going abroad.”

The late 1940s and 1950s are underrepresented in their book – a time with economic problems and political repression. “So, in a way, this book begins in 1961, when modernity came to Yugoslavia, and people started going to Trieste, to buy those Italian raincoats.”

#### BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

Critics have called the lexicon “the bible of Yugonostalgia.” Nostalgia or no, it is also clear that Yugonostalgia means different things to different people.

Says Zeljko Serdarevic: “When middle-aged people here in Serbia tell me they’re Yugonostalgic, it means that they believe in the positive values from back then. They believe the past was better than the present and think today’s ‘democracy’ is very much mixed up with crime and so on. But when people in Croatia say that a person is Yugonostalgic, they mean that he believes in the totalitarian system and is against democracy.”

For Vladimir Arsenijevic, not the least virtue of Yugoslavia was that so many different ethnic groups lived in one country. For him, the lexicon is therefore also a reminder that some of the advantages of such a state of affairs could still be recreated – if people want to. The productive interaction between the various centers disappeared with the common state, and Arsenijevic explains that in that way, apart from the physical harm done in the war, a cultural breakdown occurred from which none of the republics has recovered: “At the same time as the concept ‘Yugonostalgia’ was created, we started talking about the provincialization of this entire region.”

The two editors are Yugonostalgic to the degree that they miss the cultural dynamics they felt in Yugoslavia, now irretrievably lost. Still, Serdarevic defends using the word “mythology” instead of “nostalgia.” “First of all, the project began in 1989, and at that point you couldn’t talk of nostalgia for Yugoslavia since the country still existed.”

Second, he explains that the project's [website](#) was the central focus around which the entries began to take shape. One person would post a short text on the site, then others added their own contributions and corrections, in a process reminiscent of how myths are created. Serdarevic stresses that "the book is written *by* the people, *for* the people," unlike ordinary lexicons where experts write about their own area of specialization.

One rationale behind the lexicon is that "ordinary people" look at the inheritance from Yugoslavia much more positively than the new states officially do. Over the past year especially, positive feelings between the different parts of the former Yugoslavia have taken over, Serdarevic thinks, pointing to the 2004 Eurovision song contest. "For the first time in many years, Serbia took part, and it was the first time as well that points were given not by official juries in each country, but by the people" by telephone voting.

"And it was really great to see that for once it wasn't a matter of course that the Bosnians gave their points to Croatia and not to the Serbs, or that Germany gave points to Croatia. No, the Croats gave the most points to a Serbian song."

His conclusion is simple: the atmosphere has changed, and a book like *Yugoslav Mythology* became possible.

This leads Serdarevic to proclaim that a Yugoslavia is on its way to a third incarnation, after the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Tito's republic – this time not as a political entity but as a cultural space that covers not only literature, film, music, and other "fine arts" but everyday culture as well, for example a mass product like Cockta which is now again sold across the whole region. Billboards on trams in Zagreb and commercials on Radio B92 in Belgrade tell us, "Drink the Yugoslav Coca-Cola!"

But one of Serdarevic's favorite entries, written by Dejan Novacic, recommends, in the broken English one would encounter when traveling these lands, that we drink something else when in "Yugoslavia."

*... and now you try something very special! This is rakija ... rakija is "plum brandy" in English. It is very very strong, so be careful, it has 60 degrees ... what? Too strong? Hahaha! I am joking: 80 degrees! Hahahaha! ... Only very strong people drink rakija. We drink rakija every day ... But this one is very special because it is private, we make rakija in home... Everybody make rakija in village of Yugoslavia. ... what? No, of course not forbidden. In my country nothing forbidden, you have TV at home or not? ... Very important: you look in eyes when you say "cheers." In Yugoslavian cheers: ziveli! So, ziveli and welcome! ... ghhh ... You like it? I know you like it ... One more. What no? Yes! You must! You must! ... That's better ... and don't worry, this is medicine. My grandfather drinks rakija every morning, he has 90 years and he has two girlfriends. Hahahaha! And also when we are sick we put rakija on our legs ... No problem! ... look me in eyes!*

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17 March 2011

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21 September 2006

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