

Lost in Transition

Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries

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Why is there nostalgia for real socialism? Is it but a logical response to sudden, dramatic transformation? Don't people remember those days anymore—or do they remember them all too well? In popular opinion, nostalgia for socialism is something fabricated, invented, and then imposed by different groups of people to achieve some goals: to open a new commercial niche, to attain political credit, to win popular support, to get artistic inspiration, and so on. Thus, many academic studies have examined only this instrumental side of the phenomenon, limiting it to the “industry of nostalgia” only. But research shows that nostalgia is in fact a retrospective utopia, a wish and a hope for a safe world, a fair society, true friendships, mutual solidarity, and well-being in general, in short, for a perfect world. As such, it is less a subjective, arbitrary, ideological effort to recall the past as it is, an undetermined, undefined, amorphous wish to transcend the present. So nostalgia for socialism in fact does not relate exclusively and precisely to past times, regimes, values, relations, and so on as such, but it embodies a utopian hope that there must be a society that is better than the current one.

Keywords: *nostalgia for socialism; transition to democracy; cultural effects of transition; social change in Eastern Europe*

1. The “Ex-People”¹

During fieldwork for my last book on nostalgia for Yugoslav president Tito,² I interviewed a man in his fifties, a member of the Gorani minority, Slavic Muslims in Kosovo. I asked about his memories of Yugoslavia and Tito. He described *those times* very positively, emphasizing a decent standard of living, the possibility of travel abroad, and the friendship among different Yugoslav nations. He referred constantly to the present-day, post-Yugoslav folks as *eks-ljudi*, *ex-people*, who lost everything and are nowadays experiencing a miserable life in every sense. I never heard this phrase before and did not run into it anywhere else, so I presume it was his invention. But the opinion is not unique; it can be heard in all of ex-socialist Europe, from the Baltics to the Balkans, from eastern Germany to Russia. So I adopted it as the starting point of my inquiry regarding nostalgia for socialism in these countries, an unexpected and emotional phenomenon that no one could have predicted two decades ago.

But it appeared it has—in different forms, manifestations, and intensities—different meanings to different people. The twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the collapse of socialism provides a good opportunity to ask ourselves the reason for nostalgia. What *went wrong* after the change, so that people mourn for the socialist past? Is this but a logical response to sudden, dramatic change? Don't people remember *those days* anymore—or vice versa, do they remember them too well? What exactly do they miss, or mourn, or long for? Is nostalgia fear of freedom—or a fear of the new injustices and troubles that appeared in the context of a newly acquired freedom? Is it just a continuation of the old idealization of the socialist regime (or even a *new communist conspiracy*, as some paranoids interpret it)—or something completely novel, encompassing new generations, including hybridization and discontinuity of different discourses and activities? Twenty years is long enough to reveal what actually happened in East and Central Europe after the change; and short enough that memories can still grasp not only the changes but also what preceded them.

In any case, nostalgia for socialism must be understood in the wider framework of the [post-socialist transition], as it is often called. There are several reasons why I try to avoid this term. First, use of prefix [post-] means that this period and the societies in it do not have identities of their own. They are [post] something—exactly what, how, and where, no one can define. So [post] in the world that so emphatically adopted the Fukuyamian notion of [the end of history] seems a bit awkward. Second, what was/is taking place is not a single transition, but a set of different ones: from a state-ruled, protectionist, planned economy to Western-style production, consumerism, and market-oriented, competitive economics; from a relatively simple and clear situation in socialism to a much more complicated, polyvalent, diverse, and even confusing one in post-socialism; from the previous Marxist–Leninist ideology to today's neoliberal one; from previous forms of integrative collectivism to new ones; from being—in the dominant ideological terminology—a *Soviet satellite* to joining the *free and democratic world*; from state-owned or collective property to privatization and denationalization; from a one-party system to a plural, multiparty parliamentary one. In the case of three socialist multinational states, the transition meant their break-up from integrated wholes into autonomous, independent nation-states. In the case of the German Democratic Republic it meant unification into the new German state. There was also a transition from different degrees of cultural, political, and economic isolation to new cooperation and integration into new associations. Third, all these societies have a long tradition of different [transitions] throughout the dramatic twentieth century, in which changes of regimes, states, borders, and ideologies took place at breakneck speed. Finally, socialist regimes—according to their own ideology of dialectical materialism—proclaimed themselves to be in a transitional period from previous capitalist class society to the future communist, classless society. They can be said to have been in transition much before this latest [East European transition].

However, notwithstanding its many unquestionably positive developments, the post-socialist transition also opened a Pandora's box of unexpected troubles. On one hand, the transition resulted in the long anticipated pluralization of societies in all respects—social, political, economic, and cultural. On the other hand, this was inevitably accompanied by a series of negative processes and events, including the demolition of welfare state, the introduction of what might be called *turbo-capitalism*, the rise of social injustices, repatriarchalization, retraditionalization, clericalization, and nationalist conflicts. Not one post-socialist country, not even the most successful, was spared such negative consequences, their malign effects varying only in intensity. The differences among these transitional countries today are as pronounced as in socialist and even pre-socialist pasts. We find these countries scattered over the landscape of evaluative rankings in most international statistical surveys.³

The complexity of the present-day situation, its successes, failures, promises, disappointments, and hopes, has made many people rethink the recent past. East Europeans today see and deal with their decades *under communism* in at least four ways. The first strategy of dealing with that past is renunciation—*antinostalgia*. In most of the dominant discourses, *socialist times* are almost completely blacked out. New ideologies such as nationalism, liberal democracy, the free market, and consumerism are created and developed on the basis of a complete condemnation of everything that came before. We hear angry words about the *communist Reich*, *decades of terror*, *culture of death*, *terrible years*, *bloodthirsty tyrants*, *red beast of communism*, and the like. The second strategy is an *amnesia* that imposes silence about everything before 1989–91, as though the past almost never happened, as though everything started after it. Here arise the familiar metaphors of the *spring of nations*, *democratic awakening*, or *the new start*. The third strategy is *historical revisionism*, amounting to a complete reinterpretation of the socialist past—for example, as something merely *imposed by the Soviets*, or by a *fistful of local Bolsheviks*, *terrorizing the majority*, and so on. And the fourth strategy, which is the main subject of this text, is *nostalgia*, an uncritical glorification of past times, no matter what they were really like. Nostalgia acquired different names in different countries, such as Soviet nostalgia, *Ostalgie* in East Germany, *jugonostalgija* in ex-Yugoslav republics. They all add up to *red nostalgia*. This article reviews only the fourth of these strategies, nostalgia for the socialist decades, doing so, however, in the wider frame of the other three strategies of dealing with the past.⁴

2. After All, It Was Not That Bad . . .

This is another phrase that I heard during my research, but, unlike “the ex-people,” this one occurred very frequently. I will use it to map nostalgia, first in general terms and then as it appeared in transitional societies. Nostalgia is an essential companion of every significant social change, transformation, transition, revolution—in

Christopher Lasch's words (1991, 92), "progress implied nostalgia as its mirror image." For this reason it is widespread in all complex and fast-changing contemporary societies, and post-socialist nostalgia can be understood within this framework. Its basic structure is essentially the same as in the West, but there are specific cultural and historical differences because of the deep, dramatic political and socio-economic changes two decades ago.

In my own definition, nostalgia is a complex, differentiated, changing, emotion-laden, personal or collective, (non)instrumentalized story that binarily laments and glorifies a romanticized lost time, people, objects, feelings, scents, events, spaces, relationships, values, political and other systems, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the inferior present. It is a mourning for the irreversible loss of the past, a longing for it, and it frequently involves a utopian wish and even an effort to bring it back (Velikonja 2008b, 27).⁵ Its usual repertoire consists of images of a safe society, calm times, prosperity, and solidarity among people. Although nostalgia refers to the past, it also indirectly speaks of the present, especially if promises and expectations for the better future to come were not actually realized. Fueled by dissatisfaction with the present, it creates and feeds the image of the *perfect past*. In sum, the more disappointment with unfulfilled wishes and promises, the more nostalgia.

In postmodern, postindustrial Debordian "society of spectacle" and Baudrillardian simulation, when all basic social phenomena and categories need to be reconsidered and redefined, nostalgia acquires new dimensions. It cannot be understood only in a narrow *positivistic* way, as prettified memory of past events that were "actually" experienced by the nostalgics, but also in a *constructivist* sense, that is, as a narrative and social construct and not a primordial category. This "secondhand nostalgia"—as something adopted, borrowed, "stolen" from the nostalgic narratives of others—can be as strong, as persuasive, as "authentic" as "firsthand nostalgia." In other words, someone can feel nostalgia for a certain period, regime, personality, culture and so on even if he or she did not actually experienced them in his or her life. Positive images of the past can be today easily adopted from the supermarket of popular history, media culture, political rhetoric, and other public discourses, and not only from "lived" experience. However, they are not simply appropriated in their previous form. If firsthand nostalgia is serious, imitative, obsessed with realistic reconstruction, then secondhand nostalgia is satirical, playful, deliberately eclectic, and blasphemous. Examples of the latter are, for example, the photo montage of Tito as biker, riding a big motorbike, dressed in a jean jacket with tattoos on his hands on the cover of a CD of Yugo pop music, or the image of Stalin on an alarm clock with the inscription *Stalminator*—"I will be back."

The nostalgia for socialism that appeared immediately after the revolutionary *furor* of 1989, 1990, or 1991 shocked almost everyone, from anticommunist dissidents to the new opportunists (or the opportunists of the New), from foreign observers to ordinary people in these societies. People asked, what could be the meaning of new graffiti with communist slogans? Why are teenagers wearing

T-shirts with portraits of the ex-leaders? Why does the socialist period rank high in public opinion polls? Who buys antiques from the *red decades* and who produces, sells, and buys the new communist memorabilia? In whose interest are there so many Web sites celebrating past times? Very soon, the first (quasi-)explanations of nostalgia for socialism started to appear, in the (yellow) press, in pub conversations, in political statements, and of course in academic circles. Some of them saw it as *just another East European peculiarity*—as though it did not exist elsewhere in contemporary world! For some others, it was just something personal and nothing else. In my view, it is personal,⁶ but it also has wider social dimensions. However, in popular opinion, nostalgia for socialism is something fabricated, invented, and then imposed by different groups of people to achieve some goals: to open a new commercial niche, to attain political credit, to win popular support, to get artistic inspiration, and so on. Thus, many academic studies examined only this instrumental side of the phenomenon, limiting it to the “industry of nostalgia” only. I agree, nostalgia *is* instrumental, but reducing it only to this misses its complexity. Some of its features and manifestations have absolutely no hegemonic ambitions; they do not want to persuade anyone of anything but are ends in themselves.

In my view it is methodologically indispensable to distinguish between two perspectives on and approaches to nostalgia. The *culture of nostalgia* is a constructed, top-down (materialized) discourse by some social groups to obtain certain objectives and as such offered to or imposed on others. Street sellers of badges with Stalin’s image in Russia, leaders of the Macedonian political party “Union of Tito’s Left Forces,” record companies who publish selections of Polish (or Soviet, or GDR) revolutionary songs, impersonators of socialist leaders in who appear in TV shows and in certain tourist events in practically all transitional countries, or the designers who return to aesthetic trends of socialism—all have in common a clear purpose of capitalizing on the nostalgia of *those times*. In contrast, *nostalgic culture* is a popular conviction, a mentality pattern, a nostalgic feeling and activity of the nostalgics—in short, bottom-up nostalgia. Proofs of it can be found in public opinion surveys, interviews with different people, inscriptions in memory books on some nostalgic sites, graffiti, “pilgrimages” to the shrines of the *Old regime*, and so on. These two kinds of nostalgia are most of the time intertwined, they connect one to the other, but not necessarily so.

3. *Oh, Those Were Times of Darkness and Abundance . . .*

Nostalgia for socialism often takes an ironic, even sarcastic stance, as in the title of this subchapter, which I came across during research in ex-Yugoslavia. As will be made clear, nostalgia has many faces and intensities and brings different meanings to different people.

As a preliminary step, however, it is necessary to look at official antinostalgia in the new political discourses. Namely, after every change or dramatic event there always arises the question of how to face the past. In contemporary politics, the “repetition of trauma” in a Freudian sense appears in different material practices and activities. In ex-socialist countries, this long-term trauma seems to be “healed” by musealization and, to a lesser degree, by consumerism.⁷ The following institutions share this antinostalgic attitude by conforming to the dominant ideological interpretations of the past and legitimizing them: Prague’s *Museum of Communism* has as its main theme, according to its authors, *Communism—the Dream, the Reality, and the Nightmare*.⁸ Budapest’s *Statue Park* arose from the idea of national *Lenin-garden* in the summer of 1989 and was opened in 1993 on the outskirts of the city, presenting about forty gigantic monuments *of the communist dictatorship*.⁹ The permanent exhibition *Socialist Realism*, situated in the old aristocratic palace in Kozłówka in Eastern Poland, offers hundreds of sculptures, monuments, paintings, posters, decorations, propaganda boards, medals, postcards, emblems, and so on created according to aesthetic standards of that doctrine and practice.¹⁰ In Moscow, the so-called *Graveyard of the Fallen Monuments* near New Tretyakov Gallery seems more an open-air repository of removed Soviet monuments from all over the country since there’s not an official brochure explaining them. The *DDR Museum* in East Berlin gathers elements from socialist everyday life, technical culture, sports, educational system and design.¹¹ *Grūtas Park* in Lithuania seems more a kind of socialist Disneyland, with exposition of sculptures and a multimedia show placed in a reconstructed Soviet-style “house of culture,” tourist events for socialist holidays, a luna-park for the kids and a cafeteria with socialist menus.¹²

There are two things that all of these places have in common (in addition to a souvenir shop, of course). First is the hyper-realistic simulation: all are crammed with different objects, leaving the impression of complete ideological saturation of the socialist times. The *mise-en-scène* outdoes the reality: the *socialist regime* was never and nowhere as perfect and all-embracing as in these musealic simulations. And the second common thing are the paternalistic warnings that admonish visitors of the evils of *that time*, which is depicted only in negative terms.

But if it was really so terrible back then, why do so many people today not share this new hegemonic condemnation of the past? Their attitude toward the decades they spent in socialism is much more complex because it also includes nostalgic feelings, narratives, actions, and production. But here we face a problem; namely, nostalgia is never one-sided, but a constantly changing combination of bitter/sweet,¹³ being funny/serious, silent/outspoken, and involving fascination/fear, attraction/rejection, memorization/ironization, and so on. Phenomena of nostalgia exhibit marked differences, whatever form they take: public places, consumer goods, graphic design, popular culture, public events, party politics, street culture, art, cyber world, or public opinion surveys.

I'll start with *public places* where grassroots nostalgic sentiments and venerations are taking place. In Bucharest's Ghencea cemetery, nostalgics for the *old times* have for years now been placing flowers and small socialist symbols on Ceaușescu's grave. An imposing statue of Tito with altar-like adornments in a private courtyard on a local road in a small east-Bosnian village is often decorated by unknown passersby. In many places throughout ex-Yugoslavia Tito's birthday, the day of his death or the anniversary of the founding of socialist Yugoslavia are publicly celebrated by gatherings of thousands of Titoists. There are places where the socialist past is ironically re-created, as, for example, *Marxism* pizzeria in Budapest that offers pizzas such as *Snow White and the 7 little Proles*, *Gulag pizza (Hawaii)*, or *Papa Marx's favorite*.¹⁴ In Sarajevo's *Caffe Tito* that is completely decorated in partisan/socialist/Yugoslav way you can order popular cocktails that are renamed to match the overall feeling: for example, *Long Island Iced Tea* is *Maršal*, *Tequila Sunrise* is *Partisan Escadrille*, while *Black Russian* is *Stalin*.

Some *consumer goods*, commercial brands, food products, and drinks from *those times* survived the harsh competition from new ones and are now selling well both on the domestic market and to tourists looking for exotic products and curiosities. The Coca-Colas of the GDR, *Vita Cola*, and of Yugoslavia, *Cockta* (the latter one was and still is advertised as *The drink of my and your youth*) are on market even today. The same is true for some other products, such as Hungarian *Mackó* or Croatian *Buco* spreadable cheese, *Soviet sausages* in present-day Lithuania,¹⁵ Croatian chocolate bars *Životinjsko carstvo*, Serbian aftershave *Brion*, Hungarian cigarettes *Symphonia*, Slovenian *Filter 57* or Polish *Popularne*, Serbian chocolate cream *Eurocrem*, or Hungarian *Tizsa shoes*. I believe that at least partly they owe their survival and commercial success in completely different circumstances to popular pleasant memories of *those times*. The logic guiding consumers is something like this: *don't erase our past: we accept the new, but we will buy also what is old and good*. The second aspect of this nostalgia for profit is the variety of events and tours, mostly for foreign tourists, like *Ostalgie-tours* or *Trabi-Safari* in East Berlin. The third aspect is the market of socialist *memorabilia (socialist chic)* or *trivia* (everyday items) that are sold in antique shops, in flea markets, at some nostalgic events, celebrations, and anniversaries, but also online. In ex-Soviet countries they are called *Leninania*. Some of them are original antiquities from socialist times (e.g., medals, pictures, coins, badges, flags, etc.), while other products are new, but referring to the past: mimetically (e.g., little stone models of the mushroom-like military bunkers, sold now in Albania as souvenirs) or ironically (e.g., in Hungary, small tins with inscriptions "The last gasp of communism" in different languages with a picture of Lenin).

Most of these products preserve the old *graphic design*, which raises the question why new designers are returning to the aesthetics of the socialist avant-garde and/or socialist realism. Isolated elements of these two aesthetic currents or even their

complete re-creations are present today practically everywhere. The graphic design for cigarettes *Prima nostalgia* in Russia, for *GDR Restaurants* and *Ostel (East-hotel)* in East Germany, for sandwich shop *Snedvič progress* in Ljubljana, for some food products in East Germany and Hungary, not to speak of Polish calendars with reproductions of Polish socialist and Soviet posters, are not isolated examples of this “surprising phenomenon of the recent years,” which is “reappearance of socrealist motifs in graphic art and advertisements, above all in the countries of the former Soviet Union but also in our country /Poland, MV/ as well” (Szczepaniak 2003, 14). This very typical socialist aesthetic belongs to the times when these societies were progressing rapidly, “materializing” the utopia of socialist development. It could be argued that new designers like to return to the old aesthetics because it was so recognizable back then, (almost) unique in the world. Avant-garde art was the only movement in modern history when Soviet art took lead in the field of art and design.

I’m sure that’s the reason some *cliché* images from *those times*—far from being only from political sphere or having ideological contents, because they are also (or even mainly) from everyday culture and small commodities—are so deeply ingrained in contemporary *popular culture*. The GDR’s *Ampelmännchen* (also *Ampelmann*, a *semaphore man*), a silhouette of the man with a large hat on traffic lights, that was supposed to be replaced after the German unification with the one that is usual in the West, provoked public revolt from 1995 on. A solidarity campaign arose to keep this characteristically East German image, and at the end the semaphore man remained at his post. The controversy incited popular-cultural productions with the *Ampelmann* image on T-shirts, postcards, mouse pads, lighters, key tags, and so on. Other examples of the persistence of socialist popular culture are retrospectives of old movies, reunions of pop and rock bands of those times, newly remastered CD collections of their original songs and remakes of them by the new bands and artists, then the presence of socialist images in TV shows (e.g., in the *Štafeta mladosti, Youth Relay Race*,¹⁶ a TV show for teenagers on Slovenian national television), and popular entertainment more generally. On the level of quotidian culture, nostalgia entered colloquial language: in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, calling someone *Tito* means that he is really something special, *The King*.

Special attention, if not fascination, with the recent past can be gathered from different *public events* such as exhibitions. Judging from dominant discourses in which the socialist past is sharply denounced, the socialist period is not a likely candidate for display. But it is presented publicly, and it is usually well accepted. For example, the most recent historic exhibition in Belgrade, entitled *Efekat Tito (The Tito Effect)*, created a stir in the media and attracted large numbers of visitors from different ex-Yugoslav republics beginning from its opening in early March 2009.¹⁷ A similar exhibition of socialist artifacts and everyday objects was organized in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2006. In Poland, exhibitions of socialist and especially Soviet posters are quite frequent: for example, an exhibition called *100 Years of*

Russian Posters in Warsaw in the spring of 2004. Tito's birthplace in the village Kumrovec and his resort in the Brijuni archipelago in Istria have both preserved a respectful attitude toward him throughout the transition and are now popular destinations of political tourism and gathering places for Yugonostalgics or just tourists interested in historical sites.

The next feature of red nostalgia is politics. It can be easily politicized, becoming an element of *party politics* also in conditions of parliamentary democracy. In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet times is part of the agenda of Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party of the Russian Federation, while socialist and Soviet iconography is regularly used at public demonstrations and rallies. In Slovenia, the controversial leader of the Slovene National Party, the right-wing extremist Zmago Jelinčič, praises Tito as *son of Slovenian mother, leader of the partisans, Marshal of Yugoslavia*, and in general as *a cool guy*. He also erected a monument to him in the backyard of his private house. In my view, that's because all other Slovenian politicians, including those who started their political careers in the socialist regime and successfully continued them in the parliamentary democracy, ignore Tito. However, most Slovenians consider him a positive historical personality (from 64 percent to an astonishing 90 percent; see Velikonja 2008b, 91-93), which lends credibility to Jelinčič's party.

Socialism seems to still be present also in the *street culture* of the post-socialist urban landscape. It can be official, supported by the state or local authorities: for example, there are still numerous streets, squares, or buildings named after socialist leaders, heroes, or events important to socialism. Many monuments were removed or destroyed (or even sold!), but many remained in place. Symptomatically, a communist star is still shining over the Trinity Tower of the Kremlin in Moscow. But references to socialism can also be spontaneous, for example, in graffiti, stencils, stickers, and other forms of street art. The one in Ljubljana reads *Long Live November 29, Day of the Republic* (referring to socialist Yugoslavia, not independent Slovenia!) and *Born in SFRJ* (which is an acronym for the former). In Bucharest, Ceaușescu is depicted in the form of an angel, announcing that *I'll be back in 5 minutes*. In Labin in Croatia, there stands *Let's Recreate It 1945-1990*, another reference to the socialist Yugoslavia.

Bygone times, themes, and aesthetics were always potent inspirations for *art*, especially in postmodernity's creative eclecticism, a nomadic trip through past styles, collage, pastiche, palimpsest, provocation, decontextualization, deconstruction, dispersion, decanonization, antinarrative viewpoint, frivolity, and parody. Examples of retro (avant-)garde of the Slovenian *Neue Slowenische Kunst* from the 1980s (with *Laibach*, *Irwin*, *New Collectivism*, *Red Pilot*, and other groups), Soviet *sots-art* with ironic reinterpretations of delicate issues of political history, personalities and symbols (Komar and Melamid, Aleksander Kosolapov, Vyacheslav Sisoyev), and contemporary artists like Sergey Bugayev, Petko Durmana, Jovan Balov, Alketa Xhafa, and Arjan Pregl stand on the thin line among appreciation, hybridization, ironization, ridicule, and deliberate modification of the past. A similar effect is at

work in rock and in the alternative music scene, which can be seen in punks wearing T-shirts with images and personalities of the socialist regime, or neo-Yugorock bands such as *Zaklonišče prepeva* (*Shelter singing*) or *Rock Partyzani* from Slovenia who also mix old socialist, partisan, anticapitalist, and alter-global elements in their music, lyrics, image, and live performances. Similar combinations can be found in the song “Born in PRL,” which stands for *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, People’s Republic of Poland*, which is actually a cover of the famous Springsteen’s song, of the Polish hard rockers Snake Charmer (see the video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFfJSpwPmTk), or in Macedonian singer Tijana Dapčević’s song “Everything Is the Same, Only He Is Not Here,” which refers to Tito (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXTD8WzoQ64).

Socialism disappeared from the political map of Eastern Europe but seems alive and well in the *cyber world*. It is astonishing how many Web sites, blogs, Internet groups, and e-shops are referring to it, mostly in a positive way. Just to mention a few of them: Hungarian-German www.noszalgia.net concerns all of post-socialist Eastern Europe, while Albanian www.enverhoxha.info clearly venerates Enver Hoxha and his type of socialism. The ambition of the Bulgarian Web site <http://red.cas.bg> is “to create and develop a catalogue of the contemporary critical readings of Bulgarian communism,” whereas the *I lived Socialism* Web site (www.spomeniteni.org) collects people’s memories on that period. There are quite a number of sites on Yugoslavia, such as *Cyber Yugoslavia* (www.juga.com), the lexicon of Yugoslavian mythology (www.postyu.info), pop-cultural www.nostalgija.com, the oldest site dedicated to Tito made in 1994 by a young Slovenian film director www.titoville.com, along with another “cyber-state” on www.titoslavija.net and another, *Titoslavia*, which exists on www.titoslavija.com. In addition, greeting cards for socialist-period holidays, sets of pictures celebrating those times, and jokes are circulated through different mailing lists to known and unknown addressees.¹⁸ Socialist themes are to be found on ringtones and little images on cell phones. All these and many other examples are more than convincing proof that appreciation of the previous regime is not limited to *Old Comrades* only but also is widespread among the younger generation today. I call this phenomenon “new nostalgia,” or in short “neostalgia,” which is a playful, nondogmatic, and secondhand nostalgia, uniting a positive attitude toward the (socialist) past with other contemporary (sub)cultural and (sub)political elements.

The results of *public opinion* research are intriguing, and for many people astonishing and even alarming. A poll in East Germany in 1999 showed that more than 40 percent of the *complaining Easterners* (*Jammer Ossies*, as they are tagged by the Western Germans) proclaimed they were happier under the socialist regime, and a majority predicated they were unhappy with the economic changes.¹⁹ In Slovakia, ten years after the transition, the share of those who expressed the firm conviction that the socialist regime was better than the current democracy was around 50 percent (Šimečka 2003, 188). A Polish poll from 2002 discovered that 56 percent of respondents were convinced that their lives were “better” under Gierek (i.e., between

1970 and 1980) than they are today.²⁰ In Bulgaria in 2002, more than three-fourths of respondents complained that their social position has dropped since 1989, less than 8 percent answered that it improved, and for about 8 percent it stayed at the same level.²¹ Five years ago, from 60 to 65 percent of Romanians said they were better off before 1989.²²

A survey in Ukraine in 1996 showed that respondents expressed the most positive opinions on the following periods of Ukrainian history (more than one answer was possible): Brezhnev's period (1964–1982) 57 percent, Khrushchev's (1958–1964) 33 percent, the Perestroika period 20 percent, the period of revolution 17 percent, and the era of post-Soviet independent Ukraine only 15 percent.²³ In 1999, 85 percent of Russians polled expressed remorse for communism's and Sovietism's demise,²⁴ the highest figure of this kind since 1991 (according to another poll from the same year, three-fourths),²⁵ while an opinion poll in 2004 found that 74 percent of respondents still regret the passing of the Soviet Union.²⁶ When asked "What is the main reason why you regret the collapse of the USSR?" in 2006, 55 percent chose the option "people no longer feel they belong to a great power," 49 percent "a single economic system was destroyed," 36 percent "there is more mutual distrust, bitterness," and 35 percent "ties with relatives and friends are broken" (Levada Center 2006, 183). When asked "In what political system is life better?" in one TV show in Slovenia in 2009, televoting showed that 60 percent responded "in socialism" and 40 percent "in capitalism."²⁷ Public opinion polls in Slovenia from the second half of the nineties show that Slovenians mostly described their life in Yugoslavia as "good" and "very good": 88.1 percent (in 1995), 88.2 percent (in 1998), and 86.1 percent (in 2003), while "bad" and "very bad" for only 7.0 percent (in 1995), 5.5 percent (in 1998), and 5.2 percent (in 2003; Toš et al. 1999, 565, 872; Toš et al. 2004, 474).

4. For Us 1991 Is Not the Year Zero!

Despite evidence that survey respondents view their socialist past favorably, it must also be noted that when asked whether they would like those times to return, the results are quite the opposite. In Slovenia, according to an opinion poll from 1995, a solid 78.2 percent of respondents "completely" and "mostly" disagreed with the option that the prior socialist system of self-management under the communist leadership should be reinstated again, and only 11.4 percent "completely" and "mostly" agreed (Toš et al. 1999, 615). In a 2001 survey, responses to the statement that "we should return to the rule of communists" were as follows: 68.1 percent "strongly disagreed" and "rather disagreed," and only 20.2 percent "quite agreed" and "strongly agreed" (Toš et al. 2004, 300). When Ukrainians were asked in a 1996 survey "Do you think that under certain conditions Ukraine can return to socialism?" most of them answered negatively (54 percent) and only one-fourth of

them positively.²⁸ Russian respondents in 2006 were more differentiated: to the question “Would you like the Soviet Union and the socialist system re-established?” 48 percent chose “yes, but I think that now it is unreal,” 31 percent “no, I would not,” and 12 percent “yes, and I think it quite real” (Levada Center 2006, 183).

All of this points to a core of nostalgia that consists of a positive memory of the past: people miss *those times* but do not want to return to them. Nor do they want the old system to reappear in the present. They prefer the past and maybe even flirt with the idea of its return mostly because they are absolutely sure it cannot return. Lowenthal (1989, 28) explains that “few admirers of the past would actually choose to return to it—nostalgia expresses longings for times that are safely, rather than sadly, beyond recall.” Nostalgia is in a way an impossible wish, a wish broken in itself, a wish that cannot be realized—and precisely because of that reason it is so strong, so present, so convincing. Stewart (1993, 23) captures it well, describing it as “a sadness without an object, a sadness that creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic, because it does not take part in lived experience” or a “desire for desire” that “remains behind and before that experience.”

For that reason, nostalgia cannot be interpreted only as a direct result of a few causes or as a cultural phenomenon defined by hard statistical data. It is on one side certainly a litmus test of socioeconomic hardship: more troubles bring more nostalgia; the more everything is shaken, the greater the yearning for a stable society and secure times. The key to understanding nostalgia is the present, not the past. By insisting that everything was better before, *homo nostalgicus* implicitly criticizes what is wrong now. But not completely: it is not just an automatic reflex to deterioration of conditions of living because it also appears in comparatively successful transitional societies. Moreover, red nostalgia exhibits similarities to other nostalgic narratives and productions that today appear in the West.

So nostalgia is not only about past realities but is in large measure about past dreams, past visions, past expectations. As Stewart (1993, 23) puts it forcefully, “Nostalgia—like any form of narrative—is always ideological: the past it seeks never existed except as narrative.” In Spivak’s (1997, xvii) words, it functions like Derrida’s mark “of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience.” Present-day consumer society seems without a tomorrow because everything is here, at hand, if only you have the money to buy it. While socialist societies—as all fast-developing, rapidly modernizing societies—based themselves on the presumption of progress—of a past long gone and a better tomorrow, of a vision of the splendid future. Post-socialist nostalgia to a large degree refers to that feeling of future to come. Paradoxically, nostalgia looks back for the times that looked forward—it praises the past that praised the future. In the words of British historian Malcolm Chase (1989, 133), “The ultimate of nostalgias” is “nostalgia for a past that had not itself been nostalgic.”

Here we came to a very important notion about the socialist past, which is discredited in official strategies of dealing with the past (i.e., in antinostalgia), or perhaps ignored (amnesia), or rewritten (historic revisionism). Socialist regimes fostered the idea of their own exceptionalism: they defined themselves as something unique, progressive, exceeding their *decadent and rotten capitalist contemporaries* in terms economic achievements, political strength, social security, technological and scientific development, cultural originality, and military power. Today, all of these societies found themselves at the end of queue of developed countries, submissively repeating their model. Eccentric feelings that *Once not so long ago we meant something!* or *We were taking the lead!* appear among the ordinary people, but also as a part of the new political imaginary.²⁹ For example, Russia's official celebration of 9 May, *The Victory Day* as one of pinnacles of Russian (in fact Soviet!) power in modern history, includes socialist iconography, red stars, hammers and sickles, references to the *Red Army*, and so on. Nostalgia for socialism very openly speaks *Don't take from us the only time when we were important!*

Contemporary nostalgia in post-socialist societies can be explained in three ways. First is nostalgia as a passive escapism and fatalistic maneuver of the people who cannot adapt to new conditions, but prefer to live in "prolonged yesterday." As "a mental asylum of idealization" (Balázs 2007, 6), nostalgia criticizes the present; however, it is not pragmatic, or even programmatic—it does not have a clear "plan of action" or an ambition of re-creating the past. Second, nostalgia is also a convenient way to fill up the legitimation deficit of contemporary societies because of their "legitimation crisis," which is "directly an identity crisis" (Habermas 1975, 46): that is why "capitalist societies were always dependent on cultural boundary conditions that they could not themselves reproduce; they fed parasitically on the remains of tradition" (Habermas 1975, 76; also see Habermas 1975, 77). Nostalgia's ideological function to routinely create "another world" to survive the (post)modernistic despair in the currently existing world in fact preserves the present as it is. Its escapism to the past is in fact an astute strategy offered by and to its advocates how to live in the present day.³⁰ Nostalgia here appears like as a deliberate deceit, tactical move, smart trick: as a smokescreen it covers up the ever-present legitimation deficit. And third is nostalgia as a defiance, a resistance strategy of preserving one's personal history and group's identity against the new ideological narratives, historical revisionisms, and imposed amnesia.³¹ As such, it can have strong emancipatory potential and can become an agent of liberation from oppression of contemporary hegemonic discourses and practices.

However, beyond these three understandings, there is also a deeper layer of explaining post-socialist nostalgia. What lay at the core of nostalgic feelings, narratives, and practices, and what many nostalgics remain oblivious to, is precisely what remains at the very bottom of Pandora's box: *hope*. Nostalgia is in fact a retrospective

utopia, a wish and a hope for the safe world, fair society, true friendships, mutual solidarity, and well-being in general. In short, for a perfect world. As such it is less a subjective, arbitrary, ideological effort to recall the past as it is an undetermined, undefined, amorphous wish to transcend the present (as described, e.g., by Bloch 1981). So nostalgia for socialism in fact does not relate exclusively and precisely to past times, regimes, values, relations, and so on as such, but it embodies a utopian hope that there must be a society that is better than the current one.

Notes

1. Titles of subchapters are phrases that I came across in my research, and they are written—as other primary sources—in italics. Academic references are in brackets.

2. See Velikonja (2008b).

3. These statistics include GNP per capita (wealth level of the state per capita in dollars), the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (level of corruption defined as “the abuse of public office for private gain”), Freedom in the World Country Ratings (assessment of the state of freedom, political rights and civil liberties), and Human Development Index (combining normalized measures of life expectancy, literacy, educational attainment, and GNP per capita).

4. Post-socialist nostalgia is discussed in greater details in some other studies, such as Bach (2002), Boyer (2006), Boym (2001), Ghodsee (2004), Modrzejewski and Sznajderman (2003), Schwandner-Sievers (in press), Velikonja (2004, 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b), and Willinger (2007).

5. For theoretical considerations on nostalgia, see Cardinal (1994), Chase (1989), Boym (2001), Davis (1979), Frow (1991), Guffey (2006), Lasch (1991), Lowenthal (1989), Stewart (1993), and Turner (1987).

6. In an interview, Polish historian Jerzy Eisler (who is middle aged) responded to the symptomatic question, *Why do Poles today love Edward Gierek?* with an often-heard answer: *This is neither nostalgia for Gierek nor for the seventies. It is the yearning for the times when you could walk to the fourth floor without feeling out of breath.* Jerzy Eisler, Krowa w szamponie [interview], *Nowe Państwo* 32-33 (298-99), 9-12, Warsaw, 11–17 August 2001.

7. In the United States, the public response and response in popular culture to the tragedies of 9/11 (and to a lesser and more local degree, also to the Oklahoma bombing) were consumerism, kitschy memorabilia, and tourism that “renewed investment in the notion of American innocence” (Sturken 2007, 7).

8. The exhibition covers a range of areas of the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia, from daily life and education to art, censorship, and other repressive organs of the state. There is a similar initiative to make a museum of socialism in Warsaw (see www.socland.pl).

9. It is widely advertised in Budapest’s tourist brochures and leaflets. In the booklet of the exhibition, we read that *Memento Park is not about Communism itself, but about the fall of Communism!*

10. Formed in 1994, the gallery shows clearly that totalitarian regimes of all kinds pose great danger to humanity.

11. Unlike some other museums of that kind, it is advertised in a more relaxed way: *Interactive, playful, vivid, entertaining and scientifically well-founded, the DDR Museum offers you the opportunity to experience the GDR everyday life yourself.*

12. The objects and images displayed, according to the authors, *exhibit and denounce ideologized Soviet propaganda culture and pseudo-science, the aims, mechanism and forms of the Soviet ideology and propaganda, and disclose the genocide of the Lithuanian nation.*

13. Nostalgia is a “a nice sort of sadness—bitter-sweet” (Davis 1979, 14) or “that bitter-sweet yearning directed across space and time” (Cardinal 1994, 93).

14. The *A* letter in the name *Marxism* is replaced with the five-pointed red star. They advertise themselves with the motto *Censored* and make a point to refer to *Our Next Five-Year Plan*.

15. I am grateful to Neringa Klumbyte for sending me her not-yet-published article “The Soviet Sausage Renaissance.”

16. That was one of the most popular political rituals of socialist Yugoslavia, symbolically bonding President Tito with the youth from all over the state.

17. It was placed in the Museum of the History of Yugoslavia. There are more than five hundred artifacts on display, including citizens’ gifts to Tito, footage from political rituals dedicated to him, and testimonies about him.

18. For one Romanian example, see Gagyí (2007).

19. See <http://www.edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9911/09/wall.nostalgia/> (accessed 28 November 2004).

20. Even more surprisingly, to question (in a Polish survey) of who of the leaders after World War II had done the most for their country, 46 percent of respondents selected Edward Gierek and only 39 percent Lech Wałęsa (Gomez 2004).

21. See Sergueva (2002).

22. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2000/11/28/wrom28.xml> (accessed 29 November 2004).

23. See Salabaj and Yaremko (1996).

24. See http://www.racu.org/context/reflect_oct1999.html (accessed 15 November 2004).

25. See Gowans (2004).

26. See Pipes (2004).

27. Studio City, Televizija Slovenija, 16 February 2009.

28. See Salabaj and Yaremko (1996).

29. With the vigorous words of one unnamed nostalgic for Soviet Union, *This son of a bitch, Yelcin, has sold Russia to America, to rotten capitalist brood. Once we were the strongest nation, the greatest army, we build it seventy years, and look what we got now! . . . Bandit. Take a look at the pensions! How can you survive with fifty dollars a month. And these young people. . . . Debauchery! Where is the social justice? There’s no word of democracy here, we are living in the time of legalized thievery!* (Domen Pal, Dan zmage, Delo—Pilot; Ljubljana, 15 May 2003, 18).

30. Lefebvre (2003, 70-80) shows how contemporary society offers many ways to seemingly escape without actually leaving, in fact trapping people even more efficiently in its normal functioning, holding them “here and now” (although they consider themselves far away, liberated).

31. Balázs (2007, 7) sees it as a resistance “against globalisation, a newly experienced capitalism, empty consumerism or widespread commercialism.”

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