

# The World through the TV Screen. Everyday Life under Communism on the Western Romanian Border<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the narratives of various people from Timișoara (a city in the Banat region of Romania) who were regular and heavy watchers of Yugoslav TV during the 1980s. These narratives represent fragments of oral history that picturesquely illustrate everyday life in the western border region of communist Romania, a region strongly influenced by the proximity of Yugoslavia. Together with a strong critical attitude towards the Romanian communist regime, all the respondents share a positive view of communist Yugoslavia and its system of values; in other words, they are Yugonostalgic.

## KEYWORDS

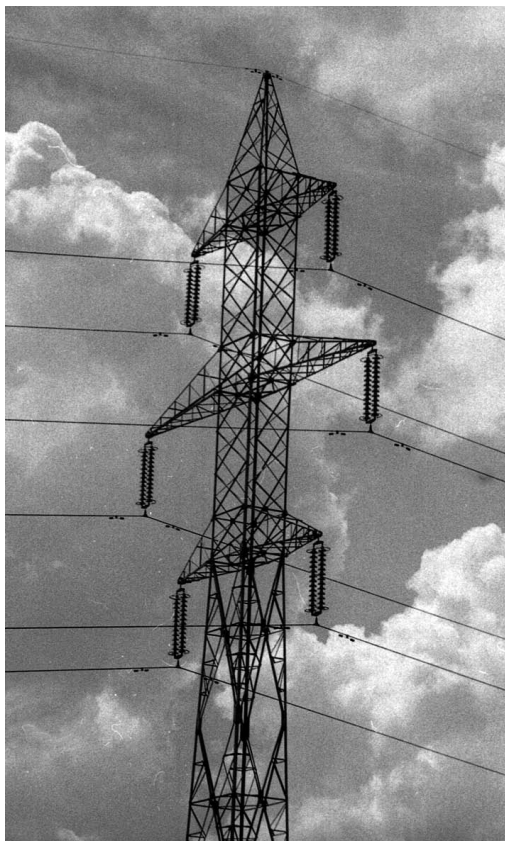
Serbian-Romanian border, communism, everyday life, television, Yugonostalgia

## Introduction

The present study is based on an analysis of several interviews with Romanian citizens from Timișoara (a city in the Banat region of the country) initially conducted with the aim of investigating the circumstances in which they were able to learn the Serbian language, predominantly by watching Yugoslav TV during the 1980s. Beside their significance in terms of clarifying the context of foreign language learning, the narratives of these people contain fragments of oral history that offer a picturesque view of everyday life on the western border of communist Romania, a region which in the 1980s was strongly influenced by the proximity of the neighbouring communist, albeit far more permissive, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

When the respondents speak of learning Serbian by watching Yugoslav TV during childhood and adolescence, their critical attitude towards the Romanian communist regime is counterbalanced by an admiration for communist Yugoslavia and its system of values, an attitude more recently given the name of Yugonostalgia. Yugonostalgia can be

broadly defined as “nostalgia for the fantasies associated with a country, the SFRY, which existed from 1945 to 1991”, where “no necessary relationship exists between the temporally and spatially fragmented memories of a Yugoslav past and the present desires, expressed by and through Yugonostalgic representations of this past” (Lindstron 2006: 233). Yugonostalgia is known to be strongest among ex-Yugoslav emigrants and Diaspora communities, many of whom left the ex-Yugoslav region after the break-up of the federation at the beginning of the 1990s (see Marković 2009: 205). Paradoxically, many Banat Romanians are also Yugonostalgic, in a positive sense: they are nostalgically and emotionally attached to the liberal and permissive communist Yugoslav regime, to the idealised desirable aspects of the former Yugoslavia, before its collapse, among which counted economic security, multiculturalism and a more rewarding way of life. As the initial research was designed to look only at a specific period and at the circumstances of the people’s language learning, the respondents’ narratives can only offer fragments of oral history that are clearly delimited in time and do not tackle the Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s.



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2) As the history of the Romanian communist regime is not our main concern here, the interested reader will find more on this subject in Cioroianu 2005, Deletant 1997, Tismăneanu 2005, Verdery 1991.

The interviews conducted in Timișoara acted as a form of therapeutic confession that helped the respondents come to terms with their collective past, with a large swathe of history, by reconsidering and analysing their own smaller pasts. All were eager to talk about the period in question, and our conversations were frequently marked by the respondents' laughter and exclamations, indicating a high level of implication and the active process of remembering. The Others (the Yugoslavs) became part of an identity autoscopy, and the respondents' relations with them were looked upon as enriching exercises in which diversity proved an important real and symbolic resource. Needless to say memory is subjective and fragmentary, and our respondents presented only one of many possible versions of the past, providing a dynamic insight into the period in question and "activating" it.

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### The nature of everyday life during the final years of Romanian communism

The installation of the communist regime in Romania, on March 1945, when the first Communist Government came to power, undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the country, an era characterised both by political, economic and social transformation at a national level and, in particular, profound changes experienced on an individual level. In the second half of the 20th century, communism became "the overwhelming fact of life for Romanians" (Hitchins 1992: 1080), serving, for over forty years, as the ideological cover for a political and economic system that turned Romania away from Western Europe and towards the East (idem). In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu became the head of the Communist Party; two years later he became head of state, assuming the newly-established role of President of the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1974. The rapid economic growth at the beginning of the 1970s, fuelled by foreign loans, gave way to austerity and political repression that ultimately led to the fall of the communist government in December 1989<sup>2</sup>.

Towards the end of Ceaușescu's reign the situation had become catastrophic in Romania: "A widespread atmosphere of fin-de-règne was imbued with hopelessness, corruption and universal fear. Discontent was rampant, but in general, however, it seemed that Ceaușescu managed to keep strict control over the country, nipping in the bud any form of dissent and resistance. His cult was unique in its absurdity and pompousness" (Tismăneanu 1999: 159). Since assuming power in 1965, Ceaușescu sought to personalise his power, while leadership of the party and government became a family affair.

Everyday life was marked by fear, intimidation, suspicion that the person next to you might be an informer and extremely violent political repression. As in most communist states, propaganda was viewed as the largest

and most effective device for spreading the communist ideology. During the final decades of the communist regime it became a natural part of the everyday environment in which people lived; simultaneously serving as a means of regime legitimization and of mass education, the propaganda apparatus resembled the military in its organisation (Kligman 2000: 108-112).

For ordinary people living in communist Romania, a large part of everyday life consisted in searching and queuing for basic material goods, including food. Stories of people spending hours in long queues to buy meat and potatoes abound, as do tales of the chronic shortages of personal hygiene and health products. Young people spent their days in school, where they were routinely given lessons peppered with Marxist-Leninist ideology and praise for the Soviet Union.

Few people could afford cars, so most relied on crowded public transport or went to school or work on foot. A common sight to which the people awoke each morning and retired each evening was that of a small apart-

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### Romanian state television

The poverty of consumer goods and entertainment commonly available to Western Europeans was compounded by a drastic reduction in the duration of television broadcasts. As a result of the “energy saving programme” imposed by Ceaușescu between 1985 and 1989, the Romanian television schedule was cut back to a broadcast of around two hours, between 8 and 10 pm, most of which was used for official and state-censored programming. The programmes were meant to reinforce communist party views and were mainly dedicated to the cults of personality surrounding Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena.

In addition to this severe restriction, radio and TV, together with films, theatre and other forms of artistic creation, also had to follow the guidelines presented in the July Theses<sup>4</sup>, the aim being that their educational and ideological role should prevail over their aesthetic value, thus rendering them more accessible to the masses, especially the workers and peas-

3) For more on everyday life in communist Romania, see Budeancă and Olteanu 2010, Dragomir 2008, Neculaiu 2004.

4) The July Theses is the name by which Nicolae Ceaușescu's speech to the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) on July 6th 1971 is known. Its full title was Proposals of Measures for the Improvement of the Political-Ideological Activity and the Marxist-Leninist Education of Party Members and all Working People. The Theses contained 17 “proposals” for discussion by the Central Committee of the PCR in the autumn of 1971. The speech marked the beginning of a “mini cultural revolution” (Verdery 1991: 107) in communist Romania: competence and aesthetics were to be replaced by ideology; the professionals in various fields were to be replaced by agitators; and culture was to become an instrument of political-ideological propaganda (Bozöki 1991: 57). The Theses marked the end of a period of relative cultural “relaxation” and the beginning of severe restrictions and totalitarian measures.



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ment in a massive prefabricated, high-rise complex, where sometimes more than one family shared two or three small rooms. People systematically stole at work and developed strategies for how to supply their households – a clear reflection of the generalised poverty and shortage of consumer goods.<sup>3</sup>

ants, and stemming the influx of “decadent” western products:

“I only wish to emphasise one thing: we must put an end to the importing of decadent films from abroad, films that introduce the retrograde bourgeois concept. The list of films to be imported must be approved in advance by the relevant Party and State bodies. At the

5) The broadcasts of Yugoslav television were also watched intensely in the period in question in the neighbouring countries of Bulgaria and Albania, but to date there have been no studies of this phenomenon.

same time, we must take steps to ensure our own film industry begins producing better films. It is necessary that all screenplays be approved by the Party and State bodies. (...) In the end it is our people, the working classes and the peasantry, who commission the work of art, so playwrights and producers must produce films that correspond to the objectives of our communist education. A film is an educational tool. We must put an end to the liberalist, petit-bourgeois anarchist ideas existing in this field” (July Theses 2001: 42).

After the fall of the totalitarian regime, copious memoirs of everyday life in communism were published, many tackling the poverty of TV broadcasts at the end of the 1980s. As Paul Cernat, for example, recalls: “I would watch the entire TV broadcast, even the most stupid of agricultural programmes, everything interested me. In Ploiești, at my grandparents’ house, we would sit together in the old way and watch the entire TV broadcast” (Cernat et al 2004: 25). Cernat goes on to describe the “pleasure, born of curiosity, with which I would watch the burials of important communist state presidents on the TV” (idem), when there was nothing else to watch. Discussing socialist Romania, Ioan Stanomir, on the other hand, contends that the Ceaușescu era was the era of television, an era in which the camera lens was omnipresent: smiling and displays of enthusiasm were compulsory features of reports meant to depict pages from the book of “the New Life”; the Party and its beloved leader were the shining faces the television screen brought into each and every household (Cernat et al 2008: 261).

As a legitimate reaction to the restriction of the broadcasting schedule and the ubiquitous communist propaganda, people increasingly began to seek alternatives that would fulfil their need for information and entertainment. As the television stations of neighbouring states were broadcast using a strong signal (especially in the border regions, though also elsewhere), watching Bulgarian, Hungarian and Yugoslav television became a means of escaping the seclusion, isolation and self-suffi-

ciency imposed by Ceaușescu’s policy. Moreover, it became a way of breaking down the imaginary iron curtain separating communist Romania from the West and even other, more permissive communist states of the region. But of all the aforementioned national broadcasters, Yugoslav television was by far the most liberal and had the most diverse and interesting programmes. In addition, it was broadcast using a very strong signal that covered the entire Banat, the highest regions of Transylvania as well as parts of Muntenia and Oltenia, where it overlapped with Bulgarian television<sup>5</sup>.

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### **The Banat region and its privileged position**

The Banat province enjoyed a special position during the communist era on account of its proximity to Central Europe, access to the media of both Hungary and Yugoslavia, economic contacts with the Yugoslavs and a rich tradition of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. Its privileged position, both geographically and culturally speaking, manifested itself, even under communism, through an acceptance of pluralism and a critical attitude towards authoritarianism. The Romanian researcher Liviu Chelcea, in attempting to explain the redefinition of Banat Romanian relations with other ethnic groups, cites the economic crisis and shortage of consumer goods during the 1970s and 1980s as one of the reasons behind this development (Chelcea 1999). He goes on to describe how it was beneficial for Romanians to nurture closer ties with Germans, for example, because the latter had access to goods that were for all intents and purposes non-existent in communist Romania. Furthermore, the existence of shortage led to a redefinition of ethnic relations not only with the German population, but also with the Hungarians and Serbs in the region: “Since the 1960s on, the neighbouring Hungary and Serbia had much more liberal and consumer oriented policies, compared with heavy industrialisation path of Romania. The

local Diasporas, but also the population from the border regions of the two countries was also helpful in the circulation of goods and images from the West” (idem). Victor Neumann also observes how the contact between the Germans, Hungarians and Serbs in Banat and their co-ethnics in Germany, Hungary and Serbia, respectively, helped maintain the flow of information between these countries and Romania. During the economic crisis, “the proximity of the former Yugoslavia and Hungary constituted an opening for diversity. Until 1989, the world could be watched through TV channels broadcast from Budapest, Belgrade and Novi Sad” (Neumann 2000: 122).

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### The communist regime in Yugoslavia

In 1946, a communist government was established in the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup>. The six constituent socialist republics that made up the country were Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Serbia, as well as the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. In 1963, when Josip Broz Tito was named president for life, the republic was renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). After Tito’s death in 1980, the absolute arbiter, the Presidency came to power. The Presidency, consisting of the representatives of all six republics and the two autonomous provinces, rotated leadership every year so as to avoid any ethnic/national domination. However, ethnic tensions began to grow in Yugoslavia and a rise in nationalism in all the republics was observed: Slovenia and Croatia made demands for looser ties within the Federation, the Albanian majority in Kosovo asked for the status of a republic, while Serbia sought absolute authority over Yugoslavia. Wars broke out when the new regimes tried to replace Yugoslav civilian and military forces with secessionist forces. Under the pressure of enormous financial obligations, an old-fashioned economic and politi-

cal structure, as well as a radicalisation of inter-ethnic/national relations, Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991. That same year, Slovenia and Croatia became the first republics to declare independence from Yugoslavia, being followed a short time later by Macedonia, in 1992, by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in 2006, and Kosovo in 2008<sup>7</sup>.

Communist Yugoslavia, which lasted from 1946 to 1991, was in many respects a model of how to build a communist, multinational state. The country’s communist period was essentially characterised, beside the absolute authority of the Communist Party, especially President Tito and his subordinate inner circle, by the many social, political and economic reforms (“self-management”) that were intended to make the country functional and keep the people satisfied without questioning the ruling communist dogma. After breaking from Stalin’s USSR, Yugoslavia became a “ratified country” to both opposing blocs and a desirable buffer zone. Unprecedentedly, it also became involved in international affairs, especially through the non-alignment movement. More than any other East European country, Yugoslavia was open to the influence of the West. Starting with the 1970s, contact with the West was relatively easy. A common desire for a better standard of living, a trend toward rising expectations and the difficulty of finding employment and housing drove more than one million Yugoslav workers abroad in the late 1970s, primarily to the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Austria and Sweden. Remittances to relatives back home were huge<sup>8</sup>. After the economic slowdown in Western Europe, in an attempt to cushion the impact of returnees the Yugoslav government expanded the economy and created new jobs, encouraging small businesses and private enterprise to meet these goals. By the end of Tito’s reign Yugoslavia had developed out of a rigid centralism to a state of a growing federalism and confederalism that sought to alleviate interethnic tensions and keep the country in a tolerably functional state, while standards of living and social security reached levels unheard of

6) For the wider Balkan historical context, see Jelavich 1983.

7) More on the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the region’s wider struggles with post-communist transition in Lampe 2006.

8) For a highly readable introduction to the history of the Balkans after the Second World War, with a special emphasis on Yugoslavia’s communist regime, see Crampton 2002.

in any other communist country in the region.

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**The literary corpus on the Yugoslav influence in Banat**

The last twenty years in Romania has witnessed the blooming of an entire literary corpus (articles, interviews, essays, short stories, novels, etc.) on everyday life under communism by authors living in Banat, where the people's memories of watching Yugoslav television ("the Serbs", as it used to be called) and contact with the Yugoslav neighbours are among the most vivid<sup>9</sup>. As Robert Şerban, a writer, journalist and TV presenter, born in Turnu Severin and today living in Timișoara, recalled in an interview:

"My entire adolescence was influenced by the contact with our neighbours across the Danube, with our 'cousins', as we used to call each other. There was a Serbian market in Turnu Severin, where the Serbs would turn up with Pepsi, jeans, coffee and many other delicacies – unimaginable things during the final years of communism.

But this was not as important as Serbian television, where I got the chance to watch big films, shows and music concerts... I learnt Serbian because, watching them all day long, you were bound to learn it, sooner or later." (Şerban 2009)

He reinforces the fact that Serbian culture

was very liberal, with the result that people from this region matured more rapidly, culturally speaking, than those living in other parts of Romania, where all you could watch on television were the two hours of communist propaganda.

Radu Pavel Gheo, a novelist, essayist, editor and translator, born in Oravița and today also living in Timișoara, remembers spending his childhood, adolescence and the beginning of adulthood in a border town that was closer to Novi Sad, Belgrade and Sarajevo than Bucharest. In time he grew fonder of Yugoslavia than his own country, as it represented a "more beautiful world":

"Before 1989, we tried to make our own choices in a world ruled by Romanian communism, which blocked almost every possibility of choice. The Party was one, the leader – one; sugar and oil – only of one kind; clothes – all the same; music – ever more monotonous and stupid. So we, those of us who could, headed for a world that was not very accessible in reality, but was more beautiful, and we turned our backs on the grey and unattractive world we lived in. In time, as more and more people did this, a sort of transition world was created in the area around the border with Yugoslavia, a mass of people who were living in Romania but whose feelings tended towards Yugoslavia, who admired the Yugoslavs and wanted to be like them. Yugoslavia offered us what we lacked in Romania. It was the most tangible model and the closest to the West. [...] Back then, at the beginning of the 1980s, that's how I saw Yugoslavia. By imitating, we assimilated. In growing up alongside them, we started transferring ourselves mentally to the other side" (Gheo 2006: 122).

Many of the Romanians who write about life under communism on the border with Yugoslavia claim to have learnt Serbian by watching Yugoslav TV<sup>10</sup>. The same claim can be heard in everyday conversations with people from Banat, who frequently greet people from ex-Yugoslavia by saying *Dobar dan! Kako ste?* ("Good afternoon! How are you?") or sing loudly the old songs of *Bajaga* or *Bjelo Dugme*

9) Parallels can be drawn with the memories of watching Bulgarian television among people living in the south of Romania, but these memories are significantly fainter, as the quality of Bulgarian programmes did not compare to those of Yugoslav television (Cernat et al. 2004: 7, 127).

10) A similar phenomenon is worth mentioning here: in the 1960s, shortly after the introduction of the radio, the Vlachs of north-eastern Serbia began listening to Romanian radio broadcasts, which they only partially understood owing to the difference between their version of Romanian and the standard Romanian language used in the broadcasts (for more on the differences between the Vlach dialect and the Romanian standard language, see Sorescu-Marinković 2012b).



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at Serbian new year's eve parties.

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## Our research

Despite its scale and importance, this phenomenon – Serbian language learning by Banat Romanians – has to date not been studied from a linguistic point of view. This led us to conduct research to determine whether and to what extent the acquisition of Serbian by Romanian speakers in Banat during the communist regime occurred through exposure to the broadcasts of Yugoslav television. This research was conducted in 2010, in Timișoara, with a sample of ten participants (eight men and two women) aged between 32 and 42, which means that, at the end of the target period (1980-1989), they were between 11 and 21 years old. All the participants were born and grew up in Timișoara, with one exception – someone born in Turnu Severin who now lives in Timișoara; none had had any formal lessons in Serbian. Some were selected from among our circle of friends and acquaintances or by snowball sampling. Our respondents are all part of an affective community, to borrow Halbwachs' term, which experienced everyday life in the communist Banat and today has a common perspective on that period.

To assess the participants' language skills, we employed: 1) a semi-structured narrative interview in Romanian about the period when they began watching Yugoslav TV, about how they were able to understand and learn the language, and about other contact with the Serbian language, both before, during and after the period in question; 2) a language test comprising a multiple choice test, the translation of words from Romanian to Serbian and vice versa, the translation of two short texts, from Romanian to Serbian and vice versa, and a reading task; and 3) an open discussion in Serbian with a few of the more proficient speakers. The results of this research were published in two studies (Sorescu-Marinković 2011, 2012a) and showed that, despite a

twenty-year gap between exposure to the Serbian language and the carrying out of the research, many respondents still possessed a very high level of communication skills in Serbian. This contradicted our initial hypothesis insofar as it showed that intensive exposure to Serbian-language TV broadcasts over a long period of time resulted in the acquisition of a relatively extensive vocabulary supplemented by acquisitions of grammar<sup>11</sup>.

The present study is based on the narratives of our respondents in respect of the social context in which they acquired the Serbian language, narratives for which no place was found in our previous studies but which nonetheless represent invaluable fragments of oral history. These narratives reveal the unique perspective of our respondents on the final years of communism and the experiences that shaped their everyday lives. It is important to note that in the 1980s, when our interlocutors were heavily engaged in watching Yugoslav television programmes, they were actually in their teenage years, so when they talk about that period, they are in fact talking about the process of their growing up. We should also mention that all our respondents were highly educated and eager to talk about the period in question, something which facilitated our research greatly<sup>12</sup>. All instantly understood the purpose of our work; they hailed it as an important and much needed initiative, and even came up with innovative suggestions (see Sorescu-Marinković 2011: 26-27).

As already known, the most controversial and painful memories to emerge in the process of reassessing the communist past are those of survivors of political oppression (Kaneva 2006), the so-called survivor narratives. As for the communist period in Banat, the most distressing narratives are probably those relating to the Bărăgan deportations of 1951 (see, for example, Vultur 1997, Stevin 2002, Spijavca 2004) and the deportations of the thousands of frontieriști ("border people"), people who tried illegally to cross the border with Yugoslavia or Hungary or the relatives of those executed (Steiner and Magheți 2009, Ar-

11) Of course we should not overlook the natural tendency of the people to learn languages in Timișoara and the fact that multilingualism is still visible even today among many of the city's inhabitants (Neumann 2008:160).

12) Cf. Sorescu-Marinković 2007 for a detailed analysis of the obstacles and problems encountered in the field while interviewing persons from traditional rural communities.

manca 2011). However, for many people in Central and Eastern Europe, life under communism was simply their “normal” way of life, even if it was no less packed with human emotion and struggles than life under any other totalitarian system (Kaneva 2006). The narratives of our respondents are of this latter kind: mundane, ordinary life narratives about the experiences that formed the fabric of their everyday lives, with a special emphasis on the way in which they perceived the “free world” across the border, as seen through the TV screen.

The analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed a few discursive themes around which the narratives of our respondents are structured. In what follows we will present the structures and topics specific to the testimonies of our interlocutors, who place emphasis on the unique character of their experience in communist Romania on the western border, the closest point to the West, to the free world, and talk in highly appreciative terms about Yugoslavia.

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### Watching television

At our request, at the beginning of our conversations the respondents spoke about their watching of Yugoslav television, as they claimed this was how they learnt Serbian. They practically “grew up” with Yugoslav TV, on which they watched everything: starting with cartoons and music shows, they progressed to sports, documentaries, news, educational programmes, and all variety of films. Consequently, the respondents were exposed to different language registers, from the formal (the news) to the casual and intimate (films, interviews, live broadcasts, etc.). They heard literary language but also dialogue from real life situations, often in dialect, or the simplified language of sports broadcasts.

Many chose to begin the discussion by describing the logistics of television viewing, namely in relation to their television antennas.

All of them remembered with joy and excitement the details of the process of how the antennas were manufactured in factories and were installed on the roofs of the buildings or balconies of apartments, and even the names given to the receivers:

*Well, you know, these receivers had names. They were called Yagi 1 and Yagi 2, depending on the model. And you could watch Belgrade One, Belgrade Two or Novi Sad, depending on the model. Novi Sad had a programme in Hungarian and a few hours of broadcasting in Romanian. (G. M.)<sup>13</sup>*

or:

*All our neighbours saved up to buy a joint antenna. Hang on, at a certain moment we also had our own antenna. At a later stage, when I started watching TV more heavily, I even had an antenna installed on my balcony. It wasn't a parabolic antenna, but one with elements. I can't remember the name... It had a lot of bars, like a fishbone. (R. S.)*

Mention is made of the fact that anyone who did not know Hungarian or Serbian would still watch Yugoslav TV, as the language was easy to understand and the programmes more interesting. Many respondents also mentioned that even Hungarians from Timișoara would watch Yugoslav TV and learn Serbian.

All our respondents stressed the extraordinary informative nature of watching Yugoslav TV, as the news on the Romanian state television was edited and exclusively focused on praising the deeds of the dictatorial couple. Interestingly, without exception, all talked about *vesti* (“news”), never translating this expression into Romanian. The same is true of *crtani* film (“cartoons”) and *filmski maraton* (“movie marathon”). Furthermore, the older participants in the study remember that watching TV was a phenomenon that followed on naturally from listening to Yugoslav radio programmes:

*Vesti. There were some dots and a rhythmic tune and tick-tick-tick-tick-tick, that's how vesti would appear. It was really great. There you found out what was really happening. We only had two hours of programmes, between eight*

13) To protect the identity of the interlocutors we have used only their initials.





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and ten, then it got even shorter, and the news was only about Ceaușescu. You didn't know a thing about the world if you didn't listen to Free Europe, but our parents wouldn't let us listen back then, because it wasn't allowed. Then, when you grew up, you could listen, but half of it you wouldn't understand. While here... And this is a phenomenon that followed on from listening to the radio, because the first contact we had with the Serbs was the radio, not the television. I'd listened to the radio for years, because all the new music was broadcast there. After 1979 there was nothing in Romania anymore. (G. M.)

The participants also described their favourite programmes. Almost all of them, because of their age, began by watching cartoons on Yugoslav TV, and at a certain point these became an integral part of their daily routine:

*Well, yes, there was the classic crtani film at eight a clock, right? [laughs] We grew up with it, with crtani film. Everyone in Timișoara.* (G. S.)

and:

*Yes, I would always watch crtani film. There was a big TV set and a smaller one. The smaller one would announce the next programme. And when the small TV set appeared and started to dance, we knew crtani would follow.* (B. D.)

In 1986, filmski maraton ("movie marathon") started on Belgrade's Third Channel, where different films would be shown, one after the other, from Friday until Sunday. People would spend all night long watching TV and recording movies on video cassettes, with the result that on Saturday the pupils and their parents were unable to keep their eyes open at school and at work:

*Then it started, I think it was 1986. There were film nights. Filmski maraton. There I watched my first erotic movies. I can't explain what an extraordinary feeling of emancipation it was! It's impossible to describe what it was like watching movies all night long... That's how I saw the first movies with Robert de Niro. It was incredible. (...) Nobody would sleep anymore, nobody would leave the house. The next day all of us would have swollen eyes. Because we worked and went to school on Saturdays. And filmski maraton would last from Friday to Sunday. And so on Saturday we'd be almost blind. And we'd talk about the films all day long. Because we didn't have anything. The greatest feeling of emancipation was "The Fighter with the Scarf", a Chinese movie with Taikondo.* (G. M.)

As to the type of films, American productions were among the favourites. All were subtitled (as opposed to Hungarian television, for example, which used to dub foreign films) and so, making use of their English, people would make connections and learn Serbian words – "lots of them, step by step", as one respondent puts it. As for television series, the respondents recall watching *Dynasty*, *Shogun*, *'Allo'Allo!* and *Mash*. Many remember how, as opposed to Romanian films, Yugoslav films featured plenty of erotic scenes, which made them even more appealing:

*We knew that in every Serbian film you had at least one erotic scene, while in the Romanian ones – never.* (R. S.)

Most of the interlocutors remember watching different sports competitions and championships, both at national and international level, on Yugoslav TV. One respondent even admitted to having taken up basketball “because of the Serbs”, after watching their championships and admiring their passion for the sport. The football European Championships or World Cup provided reason for people to come together, first in the homes of those with the best antennas, then those who had colour TVs:

*And, yes, football matches were a must. Every second year there was a championship of which our television would only broadcast the semi-finals and finals, while they [the Yugoslavs] would broadcast everything. Every single thing. Every game. So we watched football. We would go to M's, let's say, the entire neighbourhood was there, ten to twelve people, and we'd turn on the TV and watch. Just as thirty years ago we were listening to Serbian radio, now we were all watching Serbian TV. We watched the football World Cup and the European Championship. The first World Cup I watched and remember took place in Argentina, in 1978. I watched it at the neighbours'. The World Cup. And after that, in 1982, there was the World Cup in Spain. I didn't miss a single game. I was ten years old in 1978, so I only remember people shouting “Gooooaalll” and two or three sentences. But the Spanish World Cup, that I can describe to you, match by match, play by play, if I have a friend beside me who also saw it. (G. M.)*

Many participants even remember the text, music and images from the television commercials they saw, despite not knowing what was being advertised:

*They had great commercials. That was the first thing I learned off by heart in Serbian. I remember the commercials for Kiki sweets, Lee Cooper jeans... Lee Cooper commercials had a lot of sex. They were the most attractive. Then there was Eurokrem, Cipiripi and the famous one... for juices. And there was another one I remember, something like krpe za kuću, but I don't know what they were advertising. And*

*there were those with C, with your C markets. And many, many others, back then we didn't even know what they were advertising. (B.D.)*

Another vivid recollection among participants in the study is related to the TV guide. They remember how, at the beginning of the 1980s, the Serbian consulate in Timișoara would receive Serbian publications including the Yugoslav TV schedule, and the consulate secretaries would type it out and distribute it around the city. Nobody would leave work on Friday evening before buying the typed TV guide. After 1986, the consulate began receiving more copies of the TV guide, so people could get the real, printed guide:

*After that you could buy Serbian newspapers that came with the TV guide. The people at the Serbian consulate would type out the television schedule contained in these publications using a typewriter and then the guide would be distributed around the city. We all knew the Serbian TV guide was issued on Friday, and no one went home from work until they got it. Six or seven secretaries from the consulate would type out the guide and then it spread around the city, and by 5 pm everybody would have it. This happened all the way up to 1986. (G. M.)*

As mentioned at the beginning, the subjectivity of memory should not be overlooked. Our respondents talk about events that happened more than 20 years ago, so their recollection of them will be highly subjective, selective and fragmentary. However, all of them talk in appreciative, even eulogistic terms of the Yugoslav TV programmes and can still even visualise parts of the shows, films or commercials they watched, triggering waves of intense, positive emotions. We can thus say that all of the Yugoslav realities our respondents came to know through watching Yugoslav TV and referred to during the interviews have become highly symbolic lieux de mémoire.

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## Listening to Yugoslav music

The respondents also recall how through various channels they would receive records and tapes of foreign or Yugoslav music from Yugoslavia. One participant in the study admitted that he himself had been a supplier and that he had even set up a lucrative business selling music cassettes from Yugoslavia – on the black market, of course. All the participants talk with great enthusiasm about the chart-topping international music they heard on Yugoslav radio or TV and which they knew by heart. Zdravko Čolić, Oliver Mandić, Lepa Brena, Bjelo Dugme, Riblja Čorba, Bajaga i instruktori and Magazin are among the Yugoslav performers the participants most frequently mentioned and whose lyrics they knew by heart:

*We listened to everything, from Zdravko Čolić to Lepa Brena. There were music shows, I recall one where young talents would be discovered, I can't remember the name. There was a guy with a hat, like the Julius Meinl coffee guy... Yes, that's it, Oliver Mandić! Then there were the bands Bjelo Dugme, Riblja Čorba, Bajaga i instruktori and Magazin. The first three played rock music, while Magazin was more rhythmic. And much, much more. (...) And we used to sing along to them, even if we didn't understand all the words. Even now, when I sing Bajaga's songs, I still don't understand half the words. But I still know them off by heart. (G. M.)*

Most of the participants can also remember the 1984 concert by Lepa Brena – a Yugoslav music icon – given in Timișoara, to which more than 40,000 tickets were sold. It was a unique event in communist Romania, as no foreign artists could get permission to perform in the country during that period:

*And then there was also the Lepa Brena phenomenon. Just imagine, a concert by Lepa Brena in 1984, in the Timișoara stadium, it was simply unimaginable! Not one foreign singer was given permission to sing in Romania during communism. Back then I was 10 years old, and*

*I had just come back from the seaside with my father. When I entered the city there was total chaos. Lepa Brena was giving a concert at the Dan Păltinișanu stadium (B. D.)*

The abundance of music they listened to from Yugoslavia was filling the gap that existed in Romania, where, by the end of the 1970s, the state radio and television had almost completely ceased broadcasting foreign music, compounded by a constant decrease in the number of politically desirable Romanian artists:

*In Romania there was no music any more. There was only Savoy, that ridiculous guy with a ribbon on his head, and one other, whose name escapes me – my memory's better when it comes to Serbian names. And that says something. Ah, yes, it was Todan, Tudan, Radu Tudan, something like that. A short man with a face like a guinea fowl. Yes, those were the only bands. Oh and Roșu și Negru, who aren't together anymore. But they (the Yugoslavs) came with their powerful music. What's more, they had all the top foreign songs. That's where I first heard of Depeche Mode, it's where I first listened to the foreign music the entire world was listening to. Radio Cluj stopped broadcasting in 1979-1980... No, 1982. Radio Cluj had the only real music charts in Romania. That's where I heard Prince for the first time. On their last show. (G. M.)*

Another respondent talks about how Yugoslav music in fact spread to many regions all over Romania through people studying in Timișoara:

*But the most incredible thing is that people from other places would come to study in Timișoara. I failed the entry exam, but I'd still go to the student parties. We'd bring Serbian music and after that the whole country would be dancing to Serbian music. Recently, at a party in Bucharest, some doctors who used to be students in Timișoara, asked me whether I still had any of that music. Because they liked it. (D. P.)*

Even today, this generation is still listening to the “golden oldies” of Yugoslav music played at parties in Timișoara. As their memory of listening to Yugoslav music is inherently

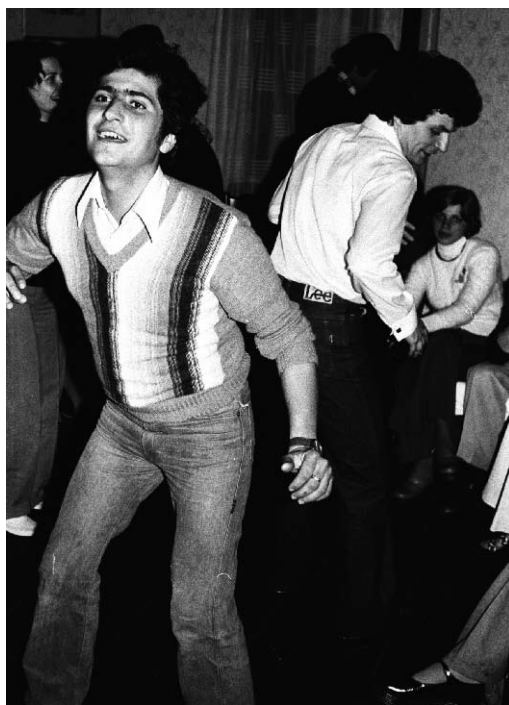
connected to the memory of their adolescence, their recollections are mostly positive and centred on the feeling of freedom and superiority foreign music gave them.

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### Other contexts of language learning

Despite their initial emphasis on the passive reception of oral language through exposure to television, the participants revealed numerous other learning strategies and contexts related to their language acquisition, describing many other forms of interaction that indicate a multitude of situations in which spontaneous language acquisition can occur in general. One such a situation was their interaction with their Serbian neighbours thanks to the existence in Timișoara of a large Serbian community:

*When we were children and played football in the street, for example, I had a Serbian neighbour. His father was Serbian and his mother was Hungarian. Can you imagine the combina-*



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*tion! (...) Later on, I'd hang out with Serbs much more than with Hungarians, and, I don't know why, but I like Serbian more than Hungarian. Even if I believe it's just as different from Romanian as Hungarian is. (G. S.)*

Another respondent recalled her first boyfriend, a Serb who used to translate song lyrics for her, which she found extremely romantic:

*When I was 16-17 years old, I had a boyfriend, my first boyfriend, Vojte, who was Serbian. And that's how I found out about Bajaga, Magazin and many others I can't remember right now. But I remember Vojte would translate the lyrics for me, it was very romantic, as back then there was no Google. Yes, I think I've always loved Serbs. And Vojte was an extraordinary boy. His parents were Serbs and spoke only Serbian in the house. (H. L.)*

The interaction at flea markets in Timișoara, where the Serbs used to sell consumer goods highly sought-after in the period of intense economic crisis (e.g. jeans, chocolate, sweets, T-shirts, Vegeta condiment, music cassettes, etc.) was another situation in which Romanians could practice their knowledge of the Serbian language:

*Well, it was a moment of joy when you bought a Serbian product. So just the fact that you were wearing something Serbian meant a lot... There were networks of people who would wait for the train from Belgrade to arrive bringing us beer, Cipiripi chocolate, Pez sweets... And on Sundays the Serbs would come to Očko. I'd go with my father to buy jeans, sweets... Saturday was a working day, so on Sundays we'd go to the market. Back then we got along with them just fine. Serbian was a heavily spoken language back then. (B. D.)*

This "flea market communication" also continued later, during the embargo against Serbia at the beginning of the 1990s, when Romanians began crossing the border to the neighbouring country to sell various goods. With some of the respondents we also noted a desire to describe these events, too, even if the initial time frame for the research was confined to the 1980s. While their memory of the

years before the Romanian Revolution, when Yugoslavia stood for freedom in their eyes, was still very strong, the same was also true of the period when the Federal Republic disintegrated. The emotions were equally intense, albeit in the former case their emotions were positive and in the latter case their emotions were dominated by feelings sorrow and compassion.

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### Extending the time frame

Even if the research was initially designed to reveal the context of Serbian language learning during the 1980s, the interviews we conducted were only partially structured and we recorded everything the respondents deemed important to the topic. Thus they also talked about how they went on to discover Yugoslavia after the Romanian Revolution of 1989 and the subsequent opening of the borders. Some of our respondents continued or began actively using Serbian after this date: some worked in the non-governmental sector and started collaborating with Serbian NGOs; others worked for a while in different regions of Serbia and interacted with the local Serbs, etc. Here one of them recalls a time spent working in Russia, where he had ex-Yugoslav work-mates:

*I also worked in Russia. And when I was there [with the Serbs] I would always speak Serbian. And when you speak Serbian you are a Serb. In the beginning they didn't know we were Romanians. And we got free beer. [laughs] (T. A.)*

Another respondent, after graduating from the Medical School in Timișoara, even planned to move to Belgrade to do his specialisation, relying mainly on the Serbian he had acquired by watching Yugoslav TV. Furthermore, when accidentally meeting Serbian speaking people in informal situations, either in Romania or abroad, our respondents gladly tried to reactivate their knowledge of Serbian.

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### Generalisations and stereotypes

At one point or another during our conversations, the respondents would also address the issue of the Serbian minority in Banat or the Serbs in general (whom they came to know through television or had met in person), which inevitably saw them fall back on generalisations. Thus, one participant recalls his Serbian school mates as follows:

*They've always been very good at team sports, they had separate teams and wouldn't mix with us. All of them could play the harmonica, it was a family trait. All of them had to play the harmonica, even the youngest ones. All the boys. (laughs) Yes. And they were, how should I put it, more free, because they knew more, had more, read more, and as a result they could be a little conceited. Violent and good sportsmen. And all our girls were in love with them. (G. M.)*

Another respondent transposes the proverbial character of the Mexicans to the Serbs:

*They're very passionate, openly expressing their emotions and feelings. It's very clear, somewhat over the top. What they say about the Mexicans is true of the Serbs too: nobody is as sad as a sad Serb, nobody is as happy as a happy Serb, nobody is as evil as an evil Serb... And they're very stubborn. (R. S.)*

At our request, other participants in the study reproduced the stereotypes about the Serbs that were widespread in the Banat region:

*Well, you know how they say in Banat, there's no such a thing as a green horse or a wise Serb. (T. A.)*

In the discourse of all the respondents we noticed that the stereotyped characteristics of the Serbs (stubbornness, determination, violence, the capacity to express their emotions, etc.) were highly appreciated by the Romanians, a people known proverbially as being of a passive nature.

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### Concluding remarks

In discussing the circumstances of learning Serbian by watching TV, our respondents recall what is, in fact, part of their childhood and adolescence: with great pleasure and emotion all of them describe what can be called a process of maturation. As emotional evaluations are important for cognitive achievements, the stronger the emotional involvement of the participants, the stronger their memories and knowledge. This unique experience of the affective community in question can be credited for the multilingualism and openness of this generation, which was otherwise educated in the spirit of ethnocentrism and unilingualism characteristics of the Ceaușescu regime.

The narratives of our interlocutors masterfully exemplify the active process of remembering (situations, contexts, images, texts,

music, etc.) and of making sense of past experiences. The opposition around which the recorded texts are structured is usually that of “we didn’t have anything – they had it all”, which functions as a real leitmotiv and constitutes grounds for expressing Yugonostalgia.

Last but not least, we must mention that many of the artefacts of Yugoslav culture and everyday life our respondents talk of (see, for example, Eurokrem, Cipiripi, Zdravko Čolić, Lepa Brena, etc.) are also part of the Lexicon of Yugoslav Mythology (Arsenijević et al. 2005), a lexicon created with the aim of amending the rewriting or erasing of Yugoslav history that took place during the course of the 1990s and written in a simultaneously informative and playful style. Thus, the narratives of our respondents can be also read as a nostalgic lexicon of Yugoslav mythology of sorts, with the proviso that the information they contain exclusively represents TV-mediated knowledge of Yugoslav realities.

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