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Shake, Rattle and Roll: Yugoslav Rock Music and the Poetics of Social Critique

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Introduction

At the center of *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is an attempt to understand what no longer exists—the rock music of former Yugoslav society. Of necessity, this makes the book a work in historical sociology, i.e. the type of inquiry that is grounded in historical research methodology but animated by distinctly sociological research interests and concerns. The other way to put this would be to say that the book's foundation is a historically-oriented but sociologically-motivated analysis, constructed as the kind of inquiry that runs on a historical engine but is propelled by a sociological fuel. Its ultimate aim, thus, is to address and answer the sociological questions that animate the historically grounded investigation, and to provide an interpretive understanding of the issues these questions bring forth.

The fundamental problematic of *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is Yugoslav rock music¹ and its socio-cultural standing in Yugoslav socialist community. Its general framework is informed by the notion that “rock'n'roll in communist countries was ... the only—albeit spontaneous, also organized to a degree—form of alternative consciousness [whose] entire strength was in the fact that there was no other organized alternative thought”² (Bregović in Loza 1990: 36). In this context, the aim of the analysis is to investigate the relationship between rock'n'roll as a distinct and important socio-cultural force in socialist Yugoslavia and the cultural-political realities of Yugoslav society in the period of the late 1970s to the late 1980s. The book's basic assumption is that understanding this relationship reveals an important story about not only (the nature of) Yugoslav rock music itself but also the nature and problems of Yugoslav society as a particular kind of “imagined ideological community” and distinct socio-political project. Thus the central thesis is that in the period of the late 1970s to the late 1980s Yugoslav rock'n'roll is, in a sense, much more than music, and that its principal socio-cultural significance rests on being an important popular-cultural outlet for reflecting (upon) the idea(l) of Yugoslav socialist community, grappling with discrepancies between the proclaimed and the existing, and—at its most explicit—envisioning the possibilities for overcoming the problems of the country's cultural and political realities. Hence the main argument of the book is that Yugoslav rock music figures as the most consequential popular-cultural catalyst of socio-cultural and socio-

¹ In the context of the book, “rock music” and “rock'n'roll” are used interchangeably as general signifiers for a particular genre of music, rather than as categories of distinction indicating different music styles. This is consistent with their usage within Yugoslav popular-cultural discourse of the period the book analyzes.

² Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Serbo-Croatian sources are mine.

political critique (i.e. reflection, engagement, and *praxis*) in Yugoslav society. Ultimately, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is a sociological exploration and validation of all these.

Most broadly, the problematic of the book can be situated within a unique post-revolutionary process of cultural change, whose framework was bound by the commitment to building the new Yugoslavia as a socialist–humanist community and a society governed by the political–ideological principle of socialist democracy. This process of cultural change was unique in that it did not emulate the Soviet or the Chinese model of cultural revolution but pursued an autonomous course of relatively pluralist and democratic cultural transformation. For practical and ideological reasons, the cultural transformation in Yugoslavia was markedly different from the Soviet “monologic” cultural experience where “the existence of single overarching discourse ... legitimated by the full punitive power of the state, was a chief feature of soviet society,” and where this (as Bakhtin terms it) “authoritative discourse,” “like religious dogma or accepted scientific truth, [had] to be accepted or rejected in toto” (Brooks 1994: 975; see also Brooks 2001). It was also unlike the Chinese cultural experience where the unitarist–centralist political principle of “democratic dictatorship” and the social–cultural dynamics of mass movements shaped the trajectories of post-revolutionary cultural change (see Tsou 1999). Because of its intent to reconcile multinational and multicultural realities of the new society with the socialist–democratic form of political governance, the cultural transformation in post-World War II Yugoslavia took the shape of a broad-based revolutionary process premised on the progressive development of the public sphere, active participatory input of the socio-cultural institutions of civil society, and increasingly decentralized processes of political decision making and administration. Thus the logic of confining socio-cultural pluralism to an ever-expanding tutelage of the omnipotent political state, central to the Soviet and the Chinese models of cultural revolution, figured fairly marginally in the Yugoslav case.

Yugoslavia’s post-World War II process of cultural change can be framed conceptually through Gramsci’s understanding of revolution as a cultural process. Its central assumption is the notion that, “rather than viewing revolution as a dramatic break after which the new society begins to develop[,] revolution must be understood as a process which begins within the old society and continues after moments of dramatic change” (Sassoon 1982: 15). Understood this way, revolution is about a sustained, mass-based, effort to build a new society by building qualitatively new types of social relationships that would, through the progressive revolutionary action, replace the ones of previous social order. Central to this process is a fundamental cultural transformation, aimed at creating new “cognitive referents” and remapping, in historically novel ways, the preceding socio-cultural and political understandings and experiences. Culture, in this context, is understood as new forms of consciousness *acting* on the world by critically and consciously working out one’s own conception thereof (Crehan 2002: 80–81).

In light of the above, the engagement of Yugoslav rock music in the period of the late 1970s to the late 1980s can be situated within the general post-revolutionary process of cultural transformation and the building of a new culture and society. As part of the broader societal process of cultural defining, the grassroots forms of socio-cultural and socio-political critique articulated through rock music aimed at interrogating the problematic aspects of the national culture and aiding the overall revolutionary project of socialist Yugoslavia. As such, they figured as constructive contributions to the overall cultural formation of the country, grounded in the dominant utopian imaginary and, ultimately, working towards its full realization.

In the context of the book's problematic, Yugoslav rock music (and its distinct streams) will be framed conceptually as a "music movement," a concept that has historical origins in the Soviet Revolution. Specifically, the "music movement" is a terminological derivative borrowed from the name of the Proletarian Music Movement of Soviet Russia. In existence from the early 1920s until the early 1930s, the movement was a form of music activism fuelled by revolutionary enthusiasm and dreams of the October Revolution. Animated by Lenin's dictum that "art belongs to the people [and that therefore] it must have its deepest roots in the broad mass of the workers" (in Edmunds 2000: 11), the Proletarian Music Movement was about creating a dictatorship of the proletariat in musical life, that is, about "bringing music to the people" and employing it as a strategic cultural resource of socialist revolutionary empowerment. Crucially, this meant creating the "new music" as the working-class art form to be used by the workers themselves to express their feelings, thoughts, and desires, and, in doing so, to offer to the Soviet society the music of life itself. As Edmunds puts it, "this entailed the organization of a large-scale educational program and the development of amateur—i.e. worker and peasant—musical activities[, and] develop[ment of] mass musical forms and instruments that reflected ideas popular in, and responded to the needs of, the new society" (Edmunds 2000: 11–12).

Derived from the essential aspect of the *praxis* of the Soviet Proletarian Music Movement, the term music movement aims to denote three important aspects of Yugoslav rock'n'roll and its relationship to Yugoslav socialist community: (1) the centrality of music as a cultural resource of socio-political empowerment; (2) the intentionality of using music to a strategic socio-political end; and (3) the fundamentally constructive relationship between Yugoslav "rock-forces" and the official society. Music movement, thus, is meant to encapsulate conceptually the strategic importance of rock'n'roll as an engaged popular-cultural force in the struggle for the affirmation and realization of (the ideal of) Yugoslav socialist community. Moreover, it is meant to convey that the utopian imaginary that fueled the socio-cultural engagement through rock music had its source within Yugoslav society itself rather than in some form of imported, or external, socio-cultural transcendence of the existing.

Shake, Rattle and Roll: An Outline

The book's central argument is built on the following propositions about Yugoslav rock'n'roll:

1. The history of Yugoslav rock'n'roll starts in the mid-1970s; everything before is but its pre-history.

Although in existence since about the mid-1950s, rock music in Yugoslavia before the mid-1970s was a fairly marginal popular-cultural phenomenon virtually non-existent in the public cultural life of Yugoslav society; it was only in the mid-1970s that rock'n'roll was discovered by general society as the central force of new Yugoslav urban youth culture and that the country's cultural officialdom gave this previously marginal music form serious thought and consideration. The inclusion of rock music in the cognitive portfolio of Yugoslavia's cultural sphere marked the real beginning of its existence as a visible and consequential popular-cultural form—the real beginning of its public history.

2. The “substantive turn” was the dividing point between the pre-history and history of Yugoslav rock music.

The “substantive turn” was a moment of Yugoslav rock'n'roll's transformation from “substance of style” to “style of substance”—that is, from a music form that derived its essence from a particular performative style to a music expression whose foundation was grounded in a particular form of substance. Central to the “substantive turn” was a fundamental redrawing of “artistic cognitive maps” and revolutionizing of rock music as a form of substantive engagement with one's personal and collective “being in the world” and a means of negotiating one's relationship with one's social *habitus*—i.e. reconfiguration of rock'n'roll as a socio-cultural *praxis*. This reconstitution of Yugoslav rock music as a purposeful and meaningful artistic undertaking marshaled in a radically new popular-cultural direction in Yugoslav society.

3. “Music of commitment” was the substance of Yugoslav rock'n'roll.

In terms of Yugoslav rock'n'roll, “music of commitment” was an embodiment of the new philosophy or rock'n'roll *praxis* grounded in serious artistic dedication to society and responsibility to audiences. Its intellectual foundations were bound by positing rock music as a committed social engagement and the rock musician as a conscientized artist-intellectual with a non-conformist outlook and critical standpoint. The categorical imperative of the “music of commitment” was social usefulness over artistic self-involvement—“I act, therefore I am.”

4. “Poetics of the present” was the practical expression of “music of commitment.”

As music of commitment, the new Yugoslav rock’n’roll *praxis* constructed a radically new mode of expression whose central preoccupation was a direct and unmediated reflection on the here-and-now of one’s social experience and existence in the world. This new “poetics of the present” aimed at perceiving, registering, and expressing the realities of social life in all their subtleties and complexities, using the language that was straightforward, honest, and devoid of unnecessary stylistic and rhetorical adornments. This directness and integrity of expression and perception was the essence of Yugoslav rock’n’roll’s new idiomatic authenticity.

5. The “music movements” of *New Wave*, *New Primitives*, and *New Partisans* were “music of commitment” incarnate.

Music movement can be defined as a socio-cultural force that encapsulates a collectively shared sense of expressing particular soci(et)ally consequential ideas by a variety of homologous socio-cultural agents (hence “movement”) through the medium of rock music (therefore “music”).³ The concept of music movement thus denotes—all at once—a form of consciousness translated into a specific type of poetics and put to practice as collective socio-cultural engagement. The history of Yugoslav rock’n’roll as music of commitment was marked by the existence of three specific music movements: *New Wave*, *New Primitives*, and *New Partisans*. The *praxis* of each movement was articulated through a variant of “poetics of the present”: “poetics of the real,” “poetics of the local,” and “poetics of the patriotic.”

6. *New Wave*’s “poetics of the real” was the eruption of Yugoslav youth’s urban consciousness.

The momentous achievement of *New Wave* was to put Yugoslav youth on the cultural map of the country as the real-existing social agency with an authentic identity and a definite social location. The movement’s “poetics of the real” was

³ Using this definition I wish to move away from the strict understanding of movement as something that suggests specific(ally codified) organizational and programmatic parameters. The above definition of music movement suggests the sense of collectively shared identity on the part of individual agents, without it necessarily being grounded in the firmly defined overall design and/or agenda. The collectivity of music movement, therefore, is built on multiple socio-cultural “emissaries” recognizing the importance of *social engagement* through the medium of music in the context of the commonly forged music scene. The latter in no way suggests that making soci(et)ally consequential ideas part of the popular-cultural *conscience collective* is restricted to music alone and that it cannot be carried over to other popular-cultural venues (such as print and television, for example); however, it does imply the primacy and centrality of music as the artistic medium of choice.

youth's cultural weapon of choice in a struggle for meaningful socio-cultural presence in society and purposeful engagement with the socio-cultural and political dimensions of Yugoslav socialist community. Thematizing and problematizing the urban as the focal point of individual and collective identity and experiences, *New Wave* offered Yugoslav youth's direct and unapologetic articulation of "this is who we are," "this is what we think," and "this is what bothers us," demanding that its voices and experiences be taken as serious contributions to understanding and dealing with the realities of Yugoslav life.

7. *New Primitives*' "poetics of the local" was a rebellion against Yugoslavia's cultural hypocrisy.

The essence of *New Primitives* was prioritizing autochthon local identity and experience as the only legitimate foundation of one's individual and collective socio-cultural authenticity. The movement's "poetics of the local" was a call to reject externally imposed frames of reference and understanding as the basis for self-regard and self-cognition, and to embrace local consciousness as the beginning- and endpoint of one's relationship to oneself and to the "world out there." The movement's celebration of the local was a powerful critique of the hypocrisy of Yugoslav socialist culture and its privileging of "external-cosmopolitan" as the apotheosis of cultured refinement and sophistication while denigrating "local-parochial" as the epitome of uncultured primitiveness. The struggle of *New Primitives*, therefore, was a struggle for socio-cultural awareness that the only way to be in and of the world was to be authentically "primitive"—i.e. to exist as a distinct socio-cultural self.

8. *New Partisans*' "poetics of the patriotic" was the articulation of socio-political resistance to the national disintegration of Yugoslav community in crisis.

At the root of *New Partisans*' *praxis* was militant Yugoslavism as a counter-logic to the dissolution of the distinctly Yugoslav fabric of socialist community in crisis. Thus the movement's revolutionary "spirit of reconstruction" permeating its "poetics of the patriotic" was a mechanism of socio-cultural resistance to the political, cultural, and moral-ethical de-Yugoslavization of Yugoslav society. The principal point of *New Partisans*' socio-cultural engagement was to impress upon the country's *conscience collective* that rebuilding of the dissolving Yugoslav space and the possibility of its re-Yugoslavization was crucially tied to two distinct combat strategies: (1) spiritual re-enchantment through reintroduction of cultural and moral-ethical principles of the World War II revolutionary Partisan tradition; and (2) a radical redrawing of the country's political field so as to enable non-confrontational existence of multiple political voices. Thus, as far as *New Partisans* were concerned, the way into the future—if there was to be any—rested on strategic reanimation of the past.

9. Yugoslav rock'n'roll was youth's cultural weapon in the struggle for self-affirmation and socio-cultural visibility in the Yugoslav socialist community.

The music movements of *New Wave*, *New Primitives* and *New Partisans* were popular-cultural means of the most articulate and critically aware segments of Yugoslav youth making its mark in Yugoslav socialist community and asserting itself as its meaningful collective constituent. The critique offered through "poetics of the real," "poetics of the local," and "poetics of the patriotic" was both youth's manifesto on Yugoslav society and a demand for participatory inclusion in its public life. The underlying premise of Yugoslav "music of commitment" was the articulation of youth's sentiment that "we are here," "we exist," "we have something to say," and "we want to be heard"—that is, "we want in." Its endpoint was the broadening of Yugoslavia's socio-cultural field and incorporation of the "voices from the margin."

10. Ultimately, the engagement of Yugoslav rock music was a commitment to an ideal of genuine socialist-humanist society.

In the last instance, the *praxis* of Yugoslav rock'n'roll as "music of commitment" was a struggle to realize the country's self-proclaimed ideal of a genuine socialist-humanist community. The aim of socio-cultural critique offered through the poetics of *New Wave*, *New Primitives*, and *New Partisans* was not to tear down but to help construct a society "in the true measure of man." In this context, dealing with anomalies of Yugoslav social, cultural, and political realities required a strategy of registering and revealing discrepancies between the proclaimed and the real-existing that stood in the way of achieving the desired goal. Fundamentally, critical engagement of Yugoslav rock'n'roll was a proclamation of a "committedly for" rather than "dispassionately—and despidngly—against" stance towards Yugoslav society.

Shake, Rattle and Roll is about exploring these ten propositions through a historical-sociological framework and offering an interpretive understanding of the substance of Yugoslav rock'n'roll as a kind of popular-cultural consciousness, a form of engagement, and a type of *praxis*.

Of course, full appreciation of Yugoslav rock music is impossible without understanding the basic parameters of Yugoslav society itself. Thus, the book's starting point is to provide what I call a "minimalist political/cultural contextualization" as necessary background for situating rock'n'roll within Yugoslavia's general socio-cultural fabric. This setup is premised on the notion that post-World War II Yugoslavia was about building a distinct "imagined ideological community" whose essence was shaped by three foundational elements: *regime strategies*, *new socialist culture*, and *new socialist man*. *Regime strategies* is conceptual shorthand for different modes of political governance

whose strategic purpose is weaving a particular socio-political fabric of post-World War II Yugoslavia. *New socialist culture* refers to the socio-cultural implication(s) of *regime strategies* and the ways in which political governance of Yugoslav socialist community translates itself into a project of national cultural defining and distilling Yugoslav cultural identity. *New socialist man* is an umbrella concept for individual and collective forms of self-awareness resulting from embedding—through direct(ed) socialization—the parameters of the Yugoslav project of national-cultural defining within the consciousness of the country's social(ist) agency. Thus, understanding the essence of Yugoslavia as a particular type of socialist-ideological community rests on understanding the ways in which *regime strategies*, *new socialist culture*, and *new socialist man* figured in defining and delimiting the country's socio-political and socio-cultural foundations. This precisely is the aim of offering the “minimalist political/cultural contextualization.”

What must be kept in mind as central to the project is that the contextualization is about explaining the *idea* of Yugoslavia—that is, coming to terms with a *particular type of social imagination* about Yugoslav society built on the assumptions of dominant political and cultural ideology. Therefore, if it does not offer much in the way of explaining how things actually worked in socialist Yugoslavia, that is because it is not meant to do so—at least not in any comprehensive fashion. Its purpose, again, is to outline what the socialist community of Yugoslavia was *supposed to be* all about and how it was to be conjured up as an *imagined ideological community*. This is crucially important because investigating Yugoslav rock music as a socio-cultural critique of Yugoslav society means understanding that the *praxis* of rock'n'roll was, in the end, animated by the *idea* (or, to put it slightly differently, the ideological model) of Yugoslavia, and that the essence of that *praxis* was critiquing the real-existing societal anomalies as obstacles to putting the idea of Yugoslavia into full-fledged practice (see proposition 10 above). Of course, the belief in the idea of Yugoslavia by no means implied blind faith in the political and cultural ideology of Yugoslav society—quite the contrary, its premise was a fundamentally critical stance towards it. But what it did imply was the notion that the problems of Yugoslav political and cultural ideology could be resolved within the existing societal framework, and that, once resolved, the idea of Yugoslavia as a genuine socialist-humanist community could come to a full practical fruition. And this critical commitment to the idea of Yugoslavia as a socialist-humanist community is the essence of the *praxis* of Yugoslav rock'n'roll and, therefore, the focal point of the book's investigative concerns.

The presentation of *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is organized into seven chapters. The starting point, as already noted, is an exploration of the idea of socialist Yugoslavia by way of focusing on the key ingredients of its political and cultural ideology. Thus, central to Chapter 1 is a discussion of two foundational dynamics of Yugoslav “imagined ideological community”: the culture of politics (or, in practical terms, specific political *regime strategies*), and the politics of culture (i.e. the projects of *new socialist culture* and *new socialist man*). The aim is to understand the nature of the interrelationship between the two and explain the

ways in which specific political and cultural practices translated into a particular socio-political and socio-cultural vision of the Yugoslav socialist community.

Building on the insights of Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explores (the problems of) the relationship between “new socialist culture,” Yugoslav youth, and popular culture. In particular, the chapter’s objective is to explore in some detail the philosophical–ideological assumptions behind Yugoslavia’s cultural model of national defining and to examine its difficult relationship with the realities of Yugoslav youth and the newly emerging popular culture in the mid- to late 1970s. The latter is explored in terms of two particular types of discovery—the discovery of youth, and the discovery of rock’n’roll—and the practices of socio-cultural management that these discoveries (and particularly the discovery of rock’n’roll) brought about. In exploring these, the aim of Chapter 2 is to set up general cultural parameters for situating and understanding rock music and its central importance as a major popular-cultural force in Yugoslav society.

The central preoccupation in Chapter 3 is the “substantive turn” of Yugoslav rock’n’roll—that is, a transformative journey of rock music from its initial form as “substance of style” to its final incarnation as “style of substance.” This is explored by way of discussing the four phases in the history of rock’n’roll’s development in Yugoslav society, and explaining particular causal cultural forces of the “substantive turn.” The chapter’s principal objective is to offer an understanding of the “substantive turn” as a point of no return for Yugoslav rock music and a moment in which rock’n’roll is transformed into “music of commitment,” i.e. a particular type of critical socio-cultural *praxis*. Thus, Chapter 3 sets the stage for discussing the music movements of *New Wave*, *New Primitives*, and *New Partisans* as specific incarnations of “music of commitment.”

The focus of Chapter 4 is *New Wave*’s “poetics of the real” and its articulation of “new urban spirit” as a form of socio-cultural critique. This is discussed by way of examining three principal rock scenes—Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), and Belgrade (Serbia)—and assessing their respective contributions to the development of *New Wave* as a music platform that provides urban youth with a popular-cultural “weapon” in the struggle for self-expression and self-affirmation within Yugoslav society. Thus the chapter’s aim is to demonstrate the instrumental importance of the *New Wave* music movement in forging a radically new relationship between Yugoslavia’s official society and youth as an active(ly engaged) socio-cultural agency in Yugoslav socialist community.

Chapter 5 discusses *New Primitives* and its “poetics of the local.” The chapter’s focal point is explaining the movement’s particular type of socio-cultural critique as a struggle against the cultural hypocrisy of Yugoslavia’s “new socialist culture,” and as an attempt to assert local cultural authenticity as the only legitimate way of engaging with a larger society and the “world out there.” In this context, particular attention is given to *New Primitives*’ militant Sarajevism and militant Yugoslavism as two crucial tactics in forging the movement’s *praxis* of socio-cultural interventionism. In discussing these, the overall aim of Chapter 5 is to understand

New Primitives and its “poetics of the local” as a continuation and extension of *New Wave*’s commitment to critical engagement with Yugoslav society.

Chapter 6 focuses on *New Partisans* as the final incarnation of Yugoslav rock’n’roll as “music of commitment.” Specifically, the discussion is centered on understanding the movement’s “poetics of the patriotic” as a critical appropriation and redeployment of *New Primitives*’ militant Yugoslavism as a strategy of revolutionary resistance to ethno-nationalist disintegration of the Yugoslav socialist community. Overall, the aim of Chapter 6 is to consider *New Partisans*’ “poetics of the patriotic” as the most radical form of socio-cultural critique offered by Yugoslav rock music and, in the end, the most forceful translation of the notion of social engagement into a committed socio-cultural *praxis*.

The Epilogue offers some final reflections on the book’s historiographic journey through Yugoslav rock music and its relationship to Yugoslav society. The closing remarks briefly consider the post-Yugoslav legacy of the music of commitment.

In pursuing all these themes, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* aims to explore the nature of Yugoslav rock music in the period of the late 1970s to the late 1980s and to offer an interpretive understanding of its importance as “music of commitment” in terms of its critical relationship to cultural and political realities of socialist Yugoslavia. This is both the beginning- and end-point of the book’s research and investigative concerns, and the framework that delimits the scope of sociological interpretation the book ultimately offers. Thus, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is not a detailed and all-encompassing historiography of Yugoslav society that pretends to offer a historical “master narrative” about all cultural, political, and economic complexities during its existence. *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is also not about comprehensive cataloguing of Yugoslav rock music in the form of an inventory of the most important rock’n’roll bands and performers. Additionally, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is not a work in sociological theory and does not pretend to offer an in-depth theorization of Yugoslav rock music, nor does it pretend to “fit” the realities of rock’n’roll in Yugoslav society within the existing conceptual/theoretical frameworks that deal with Western popular culture and music. And finally, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is not a case-study project whose objective is to validate the general sociological insights about social or political movements and their place and role in society, and in so doing offer, from the “periphery of sociological reach,” yet another confirmation of the soundness and correctness of universal sociological hypotheses and claims.

In many crucial respects, *Shake, Rattle and Roll* is a “sociological universe” of its own that uses valuable conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools of historical sociology to investigate an area that has, so far, remained outside the explicit interests of historical and/or sociological research and analysis. Thus the book for the most part wades through uncharted waters and, in examining its own problematic, seeks to unearth something that has been left untouched under the dust of the most recent gallop of Western historical and sociological curiosity through the “puzzle of Yugoslavia,” revealing it as a memento that matters not

only in terms of Yugoslavia's past but also—and perhaps more importantly—in terms of the post-Yugoslav future.

So welcome aboard, and on we go.

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