‘Sympathy for the Devil?’ McDonald’s between imperialism and the building of post-Yugoslav Serbian identity

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Abstract: *Since the opening of its first restaurant in a communist country, which was Yugoslavia, not only is the huge success of the U.S. franchise something that was merely not supposed to happen, but ‘consuming McDonald’s’ has left its mark on the post-Yugoslav identity building process. Our central argument is that the singularity of the ‘McDonaldization of Serbia’ encompasses the interactions between expansion/localness, dominance/adaptation and those who take part in this historical process which spans more than three decades, their responses that apprise, shape and constrain their everyday life conditions. This paper starts from the observation that most of the existing scholarly literature on identity building addresses the end of the Yugoslav experience whether through state narratives or identities introverted. We chose a different and understudied angle, which is a people-centred perspective. Accordingly, this paper uses different research methods under the umbrella of a biographical perspective from 1988 to 2021. Ethnographic fieldwork, comprising 45 semi-structured interviews with Belgradians, aims to expand scholarly knowledge on consumption and identity building in post-Yugoslav Serbia. In addition, conversations with influential individuals contributed to identify periods in the intermingled life of McDonald’s and people in contemporary Serbia. In the early 1990s, the McDonaldisation to some extent escalated cultural disputes between the republics against a backdrop of identity tensions. During the period spanning from the late years of Milosevic’s rule to the advent of Alexandar Vučić in 2012, political conflicts over sovereignty sparked ambiguous civic responses. Finally, McDonald’s has brought Serbs into the Western sphere which is probably best encapsulated in a local popular saying ‘McDonald’s is McDonald’s’ (‘Mek je Mek’), despite being considered ‘tasty’/unhealthy, expensive/rewarding or socially stimulating.*

Key Words: ***Identity building; Consumerism; People-centred perspective; McDonald’s; Yugoslavia; Serbia***

I. Introduction

Habitually portrayed as 'a unilateral symbol of American imperialism' (DeBres 2005: 115), McDonald's made its debut in Belgrade, the Serbian capital of Yugoslavia, on 23 March 1988. And it received a huge 'vote of confidence' from the public: the first outlet in Eastern Europe, located in a newly renovated building in Slavija Square, set a European record for the fast food franchise by serving an average 6,000 meals daily during the first month of operation (Los Angeles Times 1988). Such a performance is reputedly unrivaled anywhere else in the world. Moreover, this achievement has lasted for more than 30 years in Serbia, where it is regarded (as) 'one of the most popular American brands and symbols of the Western "fast lifestyle"' (Radić 2009). So, how did it happen that McDonald's has left such a mark on a post-communist country?

In the words of the influential anthropologist Ivan Čolović, politics at the highest level is inconceivable without symbolism (Čolović 2002). He probably did not expect that McDonald's had been in 'the field of the symbolic' since the end of the Yugoslav experiment and has prospered during the most nationalist period of Serbia. Remarkably, the biography of McDonald's in Yugoslavia and Serbia reveal that there has never been any politicisation of such a symbol from the top (to the best of our knowledge) suggesting that a fresh look is needed to grasp the role it has played. Consequently, we argue that, in the absence of political narratives about 'consuming McDonald's', its reappropriation and reinterpretation by Serbian agents contributed to 1) the break-away from communist habits, that is, the shift from collectivism to individualism as part of a broader identification with Western civilisation, 2) the differentiation of Serbs from other ethnic groups, and 3) the ultimately cultural revitalisation of an imagined community.

We therefore need to overcome the widespread belief that socialism and 'consumer societies' are antinomic. Contrary to a prevalent Western assumption, the transition to a consumer society did not start after the secession of the former Yugoslav republics. Historically, a consumer society was bound to the Yugoslav ideal and the underlying cultural hybridity between socialism and capitalism (Jelača – Kolanović – Lugarić 2017). In such an environment, purchased goods and services are endowed with symbolic, expressive and cultural value, and thus contribute crucially to the construction of a collective and individual identity (Patterson, 2011). In this paper, we endorse the view of Zukin and Maguire (2004: 173) for whom consumption is an 'institutional field' that connects 'economic and cultural institutions, large-scale changes in social structure, and discourses of the self'. Following this line of reasoning, the arrival of McDonald's in the late Yugoslavia has set a motivating agenda in which individual Serbian men and women underwent consumption as a project of shaping and voicing a 'new-found' identity. Put in simple words, McDonald's,

and its corollary McDonaldisation conceived 'at large' as a cultural process, have a forceful influence on the 'way individuals experience their world' (Ritzer – Stillman 2003: 33). More precisely, our argument borrows and extends that of Featherstone, Lash and Robertson (1995), that McDonaldisation has given an international but also an ethnic character to microcosmic routines. Here, McDonaldisation is viewed as a post-communist emancipatory consumption pattern and an implicit identity building phenomenon. As such, it differs from but also aims to complement previous scholarly studies focusing on 'production' aspects (e.g., Czeglédy 2002).

This article is organised as follows. First, we condense the existing scholarly literature on consumption and bottom-up identity building with a particular focus on Yugoslavia/Serbia. We added comparative insights from other communist countries as the advent of a consumer society under socialist regimes was far from being homogeneous and followed structurally different paths. Then, the research methodology we implemented is briefly outlined. Next, we identify four distinct, but still interconnected, periods in the McDonaldisation of Yugoslavia/Serbia. These moments reveal their relevance for understanding the mutations of Serbian society and their underlying identity issues in both the pre- and post-Yugoslav Serbia. The third section is dedicated to the first stage of the McDonaldisation of Yugoslavia/Serbia, going from 1988 to 1991. Here, we explore how McDonald's reconfigured the citizen-consumer interface, a major transformation that exemplified a (cultural) turn from collectivism to individualism. The main contention is that if, at the micro-level, consumers were the bearers of Yugoslav socialism (Duda 2017), they also shaped the post-Yugoslav social and cultural landscape.

In the fourth section, we delve into the exclusive launch of McDonald's in Serbia as a way to establish how the construction of a post-Yugoslav Serbian identity mobilised alternative and bottom-up strategies for defining the Serbian nation vis-a-vis other Yugoslav republics/nations. It is examined in relation to the official Yugoslav ideology and reflects a shift towards the ideal of new state developmentalism in a period of increased globalisation, 'national-liberal and xenophobic nationalism' (Guzina 2003). The fifth section highlights civic responses in the form of a 'love and hate' affair with the U.S. franchise to the Serbian political crisis over national sovereignty from the end of the 1990s to 2012. The sixth section analyses the ultimate phase of the McDonaldisation process following Aleksandar Vučić's. He is currently president of Serbia. In 2012, he served as prime minister.[1] This is the time in which, in parallel to a break-up with past nationalist state discourses, citizens of Serbia through the consumption of McDonald's revamped some sort of Yugoslav cultural hybridity in bridging Western cultural citizenship and local traditions. Finally, the conclusion recaps the contributions of the paper.

1 He currently holds the 'President of Serbia' position. In 2012, he served as prime minister.

We wish to heighten our comprehension of how McDonaldisation has been working in an Eastern European setting and add the Serbian and Yugoslav cases to the growing stream of scholarly works on identity building through consumption in post-communist societies (e.g., Berdahl 2005; Patico – Caldwell 2002; Seliverstova 2017). Up to now, in Yugoslavia/Serbia the study of identity construction has largely focused on the role of the country's political elites while the responsibility of human action has been neglected. This paper aims to fill this gap.

II. Theoretical insights

We start from the premise that if Yugoslavia represents the past, then McDonaldisation incarnates a bridge between past and a 'conceivable future' in the sense of Ritzer (2002) and has helped the Serbs to 'synchronize their historical watch' (Appadurai 1996: 2) with the West. More specifically, the dynamics of McDonaldisation understood as a global phenomenon, induce a change in how people identify themselves in relation to the world at a specific historical situation following Friedman (1994). Applying the author's line of reasoning leads to the suggestion that McDonaldisation is articulated dialectically with the structures and boundaries of Serbian society, both containing and transforming their own internal boundaries. Consequently, we endorse the allegation that the local and the global concurrently form the content of a new reality that organises the already existing social and identity fields (see Friedman 1994) within which Westernised as well as globalised foodstuffs such as (Mac) burgers and broadly speaking McDonald's restaurants, (then) become a 'major locus' of post-communist identification, more than a foray into Western culture. Consumption, and specifically that of foreign brands such as McDonald's, offers an original lens for analysing the mutation of Serbian society from the last convulsions of Yugoslavia to the present time.

On the one hand, scholarly literature has primarily addressed consumption issues in both Yugoslavia and Serbia from a historical and social-cultural perspectives (for a review, see Erdei 2018). During the Yugoslav period and along diverse shopping experiences, Luthar (2006) emphasised the symbolic value and community significance of taking possession of material commodities. This characteristic makes the Yugoslav case rather unique given that in other state socialist societies such as Romania, consumption practices (in a situation of shortage) were almost exclusively restricted to 'hoarding, rationing, intensive recycling and extensive repairs' (Chelcea 2002). In GDR, consumption focused on usefulness instead of symbolic differentiation and comprised a social vs. an individual orientation (Merkel – Courtois 1997).

During the transition period, (Western) 'global icons' played a critical role in the emancipation process within which progress and resistance encountered

each other in everyday life (see Erdei 2011). Surprisingly, the progressive ritualisation of consuming McDonald's (see Kottak 1978) in Serbia has received little consideration with the exception of Vučetić (2013), whereas this phenomenon went beyond mere 'discovery' for post-socialist citizens and rationalisation of food processes. It is part of a modernisation process (through consumption) made of 'moments and movements' (Slater – Miller 2007). This is to suggest that, like television, which had a major social and cultural influence on the development of Yugoslavia after World War II and tightly linked with 'future-oriented ideology' (Erdei 2021: 93), the transformative role of McDonald's since the last years of the Yugoslav federation has been misjudged.

On the other hand, most existing studies dealing with post-Yugoslav identities are introverted and point to the contribution of local cultural artefacts, from popular music such as Serbian 'heroic songs' (Hudson 2003) to history textbooks (Crawford 2003; Obradović 2016) and the Turbofolk musical style (see Archer 2012). Moreover, top-down approaches largely dominate the debates, from the influence of the 1986 'Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences' to the Serbian national project in reconstructing a 'cultural unity' (Miller 2004) and its role in building an exclusive and politically (and emotionally) charged Serbian identity (Morus 2007) to the role of state narratives and nationalist discourses (e.g. Vujaccić 2003) with regular references to historical events, such as the battle of Kosovo in 1389 (e.g. Cohen 2014). In this regard, the book *The politics of symbols in Serbia* (Čolović 2002) probably best encapsulates ethnocentric discourse, and naturalises and essentialises key topoi of ethno-national mythology. While these approaches have the merit to highlight an ethnicisation process that contributed to the distancing of the Other, they leave little space to investigate the role of human agency in the construction of post-Yugoslav Serbian identity.

We build from the argument that 'nations and their associated phenomena [such as nationalism] are dual phenomena, constructed primarily from above, but which can only be understood if analysed from below as well. That is, in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, desires and interests of ordinary people, who are not necessarily nationals and even less nationalists' (Hobsbawm 1991: 10). The so-called 'bottom-up' or 'soft' approaches to identity issues have multiplied over the past ten years. They mainly emphasise the role of micro-actors and thus place the construction of identity in a 'day-to-day' perspective (Fox – Miller-Idriss 2008; Polese et al. 2017). This position has stimulated the development of a research stream aimed at examining the role of human action and how identities are 'renegotiated' on a daily basis, taking as a field of study countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc (e.g., Knott 2019; Kulyk 2011; Cheskin 2013). This paper is part of this trend.

III. Research methodology

The present paper is based on two different research methods articulated around the biographical approach developed by Kopytoff (1986). Such a narrative scheme aims to uncover the latent reasons why 'alien objects' are adopted and how people culturally redefine them.

Consequently, besides methodically amassed historical data between 1988 and 2021 including both local (in Serbian) and foreign newspapers (mainly in English), it combines ethnographic fieldwork and an ordinary citizen's perspective. In order to understand what concepts such as McDonaldisation and citizenship mean in the context of people's day-to-day (eating and drinking) routines across more than three decades, it is critical to provide an alternative view to the taken-for-granted dichotomy between East and West and to challenge top-down approaches to identity building. Besides, we aim to go beyond any fixed political category (Kott 2004), to go beneath the 'uniform surface of dictatorship' as Jarausch (1999) recommended it and, accordingly, how it daily worked under the various successive regimes since the collapse of Yugoslavia. As emphasised by Knott (2015: 467) such an approach adds 'a richness of context and a bottom-up perspective that quantitative and elite-level interviews fail to provide'. Thus, participants were explicitely asked 'Do you/Would you go for a burger or ice-cream or coffee/tea or cake at McDonald's? Yes/No, why?' We also posed more general questions about the importance of the country of origin and the company's longevity in Serbia in affecting (or not) their consumption decision.

Forty-five semi-structured interviews[2] (30–50 minutes) with Belgradians were conducted *in situ* and individually during a two-month period (April-May 2018). The survey sampling method used was a systematic random sampling because of its intrinsic qualities (see Acharya et al. 2013). Moreover, control for potential method biases was achieved in following the procedures recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) with a particular focus on respondents' diversity (in terms of location and age) and privacy issues. With respect to the latter, given that most of our respondents neither wished their first name to be mentionned nor agreed to be recorded or to write their answers on the questionnaire (we uncovered this peculiarity during the pre-test phase), we have respected their request for privacy in using M for male and F for female for gender type, in addition to their age, and we documented their responses on the questionnaire itself.

The study sample comprises educated (38.6% hold a BA) Belgrade inhabitants aged 19 to 77 years. On the former point, our respondents hold a higher education level compared to the population of the Belgrade region according

2 Data used in this paper belong to a large body of material that was formed for the sake of a wider research project which explores the role of general factors (attachment, type of clientele, etc.) potentially affecting residents' attitudes towards eating and/or drinking places.

to national statistics (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2019: 12). This may be explained by the positioning of the franchise (higher prices compared to local substitutes[3]) in Serbia and consequently the structure of McDonald's clientele, which is composed of individuals possessing a higher purchasing power. Male and female respondents are evenlly distributed, and a majority works in the private sector (36.4%). The participants' profile is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample descriptive statistics

	Level	%*
Age	18–24 25–34 35–44 45–54 55–64 65+	25 29.5 20.5 9.1 11.4 4.5
Gender	Male Female	50 50
Level of education	Primary school High school Lyceum BA Master PhD	0 25 25 38.6 6.8 4.5
Job position	Private sector employee Public sector employee Self-employed Unemployed Housewife Retired Student Other	36.4 6.8 4.5 6.8 2.3 11.4 29.5 2.3

* Rounded to one decimal place.

Apart from interviews with Belgrade inhabitants, we also consulted key informants (marketing-communication designer/Expert 1, ministry of interior official/Expert 2, essayist/Expert 3), raising questions with them to explore the microsocial role McDonald's played in Yugoslavia/Serbia after its arrival in 1988. 'Conversations were conducted under a historical perspective aiming to place Serbia in context' (see Gowan 1999) and accordingly to identify 'ages' or periods in the intermingled life of McDonald's and people in contemporary Serbia, these experts thus acting as 'crystallization points' (Bogner – Menz 2009: 2). Their 'privileged' knowledge (in the sense that they were and are still

3 In Serbia, the average price of a meal in a 'cheap restaurant' is 700 Dinars (400–1200) while a 'McMeal' or 'combo meal' at McDonald's costs on average 600 Dinars (500–700) (Available at: http://hikersbay.com/prices/serbia?lang=en).

customers of McDonald's) contributed to contextualising the development of the franchise in Yugoslavia/Serbia and its underlying political, cultural and temporal dynamics.

Data was analysed using an iterative reflexive process in the sense of 'what the data are telling us' giving 'subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings' with the aim of 'sparking insights and developing meaning' (Srivastava – Hopwood 2009: 77).

The decision to locate the empirical investigation in the Belgrade region was based on two major reasons. Firstly, the first McDonald's restaurant was opened in Belgrade. Secondly, in 2018, 80% of McDonald's restaurants were located in the Belgrade region (21/26). Accordingly, we aim to deliver an in-depth and contextualised comprehension of certain facets of everyday human experience through the intensive examination of a specific case (Polit – Beck 2010). Our/This/Such an approach pertains to the second model of generalisability proposed by Firestone (1993), which is 'analytic generalization'.

IV. Contextualising the arrival of McDonald's in a communist country: the Yugoslav ideal and birth of a consumer society

While the communist dogma 'demonized the excesses of Western capitalism by depicting its consumption practices as hedonistic and fueled by exploitation' (Swader – Ross 2020: 2), the U.S. franchise found a fertile ground in Yugoslavia: among the countries that belonged to the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia contested the ideological demarcation of the cold war by putting into practice a local order of 'economic democracy and decentralized, market socialism' (Woodward 1995: xiii). Its corollary, mass consumption, was economically and symbolically important as part of the Yugoslav League of Communists' political agenda concerned with providing its citizens the highest living standards compared to other communist countries, such as the GDR where a changing class structure led to its dawn in the 1970s and 1980s (see Merkel 1999). The inception of a mass consumer culture dates back to the late fifties (Duda 2017) and materialised with the opening of an 'American-style' supermarket in downtown Belgrade in April 1958 (Rusinow 2008). Then, it became progressively obvious that Marshal Tito's political and cultural project was inspired by the United States, leading the Yugoslav socialist model or 'cultural hybridity' to be designated by quite a few historiographical metaphors (Jelača – Kolanović – Lugarić 2017) such as 'Coca-Cola socialism', an expression coined by Vučetić (2018) to describe the Americanisation of Yugoslav culture throughout the 1960s.

The 1980s' in Yugoslavia showed a contrasting picture. Although the country faced an important economic crisis (shortage of some goods such as plain flour or sugar), for its citizens consumption was symbolically more important than

ever and occurred in numerous ways as 'transnational consumerism' evolved from 'seasonal shopping' in Italy, which had been popular since the 1950s, (Luthar 2006) to the frenetic search for *Starke* (All-Star Converse) and *Najke* (Nike) sports shoes during the 1980s. Actually, despite low economic growth, consumption spread among the various layers of society to become a mode of social and cultural action (see Hirschle 2014).

At this stage of development of Yugoslavia, the arrival of McDonald's marked a turning point in the transformation of Serbian society. In 1988, the use of a national identity rhetoric by the new Serbian political establishment led to a 'verbal civil war' between Yugoslav republics (Hayden 1988: iv). Whereas increasing tensions between its constituents were shaking the Yugoslav Federation, one could hear another sound from Belgrade's Slavija Square where the golden arches of McDonald's reached over the communist world for the first time: 'I can't believe American hamburgers are finally here', said an American woman living in Belgrade (Stojanović 1988) or 'I'm going to the Army tomorrow', bemoans an 18-year-old young man, 'why aren't they open yet?' (Echikson 1988).

A few days after its official opening, my cousin Jelena told me a McDonald's restaurant just opened in Belgrade. 'Next time you come to visit us, we must take you to McDonald's!' It sounded like the new attraction in town, a must-see, anyone and particularly foreigners must visit like the Kalemegdan fortress or Beogradjanka mall and supermarket tower, the city's tallest and most modern building. While she was really excited, I told myself 'Why do you need a Mac?! You have *cevapis*[4] and *pljeskavicas*[5] served in traditional *kafanas*[6]'. Actually, they were highly proud of having a McDonald's restaurant.

V. The late 1980s in Yugoslavia/Serbia

To begin with, "Yugoslavia is no exception when it came to the pressures for change in Eastern Europe, which increased in the 1980s and which were rooted in 'the communist regimes' inability to solve the central problem of legitimation and these pressures found multivarious outlets such as in culture, while simultaneously exciting tensions along latent axes such as those of an ethnic nature' (Ramet 1995: 4). It took shape in Yugoslavia in apparently diverging phenomena that are, on the one hand, a weakening of the unitary state and, on the other hand, a transition towards a market economy and political diversity. Under the auspices of McDonald's, an influx of positive influences led to three paradigm changes in the ordinary lives of the Serbs.

4 Minced meat rolls are a typical meal from the Balkan region.

5 *Pljeskavica* is a kind of spicy hamburger. It is considered 'one of the most famous dishes in traditional Serbian cuisine' (Available at: https://www.worldfoodstory.co.uk/recipe/pljeskavica) but is also very popular in all former Yugoslav republics.

6 A typical local tavern.

While the queue was 'a constant and immediately recognisable attribute of Soviet everyday life' (Bogdanov 2012: 77), *kafanas* were acknowledged as noteworthy attributes of the everyday economic and cultural life of the Yugoslav urban landscape. From small villages to the main cities, its dominant picture was that of groups of men and sometimes women hanging together and groups of people (families and/or friends) gathering around a line of tables for a meal. Operating in such places is what Jeffrey et al. (2018) named 'intimacy--geopolitics', where 'embodied practices of proximity, institutional belonging and quotidian routines forge new articulations of political subjectivity, often challenging social cleavages on which state formation has been based' (p. 113). They were immortalised by the legend surrounding the Zlatna Moruna tavern located in Belgrade, where Gavrilo Princip and the members of the organisation 'Mlada Bosna' planned the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand.[7]

The arrival of McDonald's has reconfigured the citizen/restaurant interface. Its corollary, McDonaldisation, broke the traditional communalist rule of *kafanas* typified by 'sitting and eating at the same table' and replaced it with individualist attitudes of 'buy and leave' as Jimbo has emphasised in its blog: 'Namely, as it happens in our country, because we Balkan people are a tavern people, people knew how to eat and then sit, smoke and shit on the political elite/politics, as it is the custom [here]. But there is no such thing in McDonalds. Did you consume it? Yes? Go for a walk! They say they trained staff in Belgrade on how to discreetly chase people away after eating. Why are you now polluting and wasting space? Get out [of here] bro, you're consumed!'[8] Thus, a new mundane social and cultural ritual replaced an older one as a 'new' source of satisfaction.

Specifically, this 'tectonic shift' has created a new 'urban (café) sociality', attracting young people and women who usually did not go to *kafanas* on their own but with parents and on particular occasions. Such a post-communist realm is then characterised by 'particular types of togetherness and (partial) forms of belonging' (Bookman 2014).

> 'When I was a kid, about 13 years old, I ran away from school to McDonald's with friends and we threw fries on each other… It was great!' (Expert 1/49).

Obviously, as Ritzer (2002) put it, there is a sort of delight coupled with such food and its surroundings. Nevertheless, in the Yugoslav case, due to its intimate functioning, McDonaldisation had a wide scope of influence in generating

7 Available at: https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/2274695-ovo-je-beogradska-kafana-iz-koje-je--gavrilo-princip-krenuo-u-atentat-na-franca-ferdinanda-video

8 Available at: http://jimblog.com.hr/2017/06/21/kako-je-mcdonalds-instantno-unistio-veliku-cekaonicu/ (published on 21 June 2017).

a (new) 'third place experience' for specific social groups. It redefined social interactions particularly for women who were engaged in a long and winding road from the washing machine and the construction of a housewives' role (Sitar 2015) to the establishment of a new narrative of women as 'working girls'.

> 'I liked McDonald's because I could sit alone there and "in peace" [understood as "none bothered me"]. I was 20 years old, and it was unthinkable for me to sit in a traditional *kafana* alone, I could do it at McDonald's. "He" set me free in that sense... Nobody asked me, but to say' (Expert 3/52).

> After the long-lasting struggle between socialist economic transformations and patriarchal social models stressed by Đurović (2018), and before scholars provided empirical evidence of the negative consequences of transition on women's lives in Eastern European countries, such as the perception that the fight for women's rights was enforced by the Western World (Morvai 2004), the market economy carried by McDonald's provided a parenthesis in the daily lives of women through 'ripples of formal equality and emancipation in a seemingly endless patriarchal ocean' (Petrova 2018: 22).

These mutations of Yugoslav society were the preamble of a deeper and wider call for questioning the construction of legitimacy 'from the top' which was the prerogative of communist regimes. Yugoslavia also endured 'a collective crisis of faith' in the Yugoslav ideal of 'brotherhood and unity'. This is to contend that civil society in post-Yugoslav Serbia survived as a cultural and pragmatic counterimage of communism and a supporter to nationalists' exclusive hegemonic goals (see Di Palma 1991).

McDonald's as an identity marker and maker in the early 1990s

Nations' chronicles are paved with events illustrating that sport and national identity are intricately linked (Bogdanov 2011). Throughout the 1980s, the frustrations and 'powerlessness' that inhabitants of Yugoslavia faced in their daily routines were growing. Moreover, the worsening of economic conditions which highlighted the failure of the Yugoslav socialist programme, in return, fed ethnonationalist sentiments among political elites. In her survey of Yugoslav scholars, Dević (2016) pointed out that 'many ordinary people in Yugoslavia observed the existence of conflicts along ethnic and nationalist lines as a top--down threat, played out among the top layers of the six republics' Leagues of Communists, in contrast to the non-conflictual inter-ethnic relations at the grassroots level' (p. 21). This argument is (somewhat) belied by the facts. The exclusive opening of McDonald's in Serbia gave power to the people/Serbs to affirm their (national) identity over the citizens of the other republics while

multifaceted tensions between the Yugoslav republics were reflected in sports and particularly football.

During the 'Yugoslav socialist project', sports exposed the (local) forms of nationalism at work within the former Federation and overseen by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia patriotic rhetoric of interethnic 'brotherhood and unity' (Perica 2001). It is therefore not surprising that the Yugoslav crisis sparked eruptions of overt ethnic hostility and violence in sports arenas and uncovered a definitive fracture between Yugoslav republics and detachment from the Yugoslav ideology. On 13 May 1990, during a game between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade at Maksimir,[9] Red Star Belgrade (Serbian) fans sang 'We have got McDonalds, where is yours?' ('Mi imamo 'Mekdonalds', a gde je vama?'[10]).

> 'There was pride because it [McDonald's] is not in Zagreb and the like. Just proud to have it. Something similar to how we could buy jeans in Trieste, and the Czechs, Hungarians, Bulgarians can't. In a sense, we are more modern, we are more advanced, something like that' (Expert 3/52).

In other words, the US franchise implicitly validated 'on the pitch' that Serbia symbolically embraced globalisation and entered into modernity while other republics or 'former YU-new states' didn't. Accordingly, McDonald's fostered a sense of pride in Serbian society and definitely distanced it from its neighbours. McDonald's was not only associated with the Serbs but also with the capital city of Belgrade, which, de facto, carried symbolically both unique and distinct features that helped to differentiate oneself from others and raise self-esteem (Twigger-Ross – Uzzell 1996). Although the U.S. fast-food chain was a passive actor of this event, the brand instilled feelings of (economic/cultural) superiority and national ascendancy (Ariely 2016) of the Serbs over other ethnic groups (Croats, etc.) and, as such, was regarded as a symbol of Serbian nationalism besides folkloric texts (e.g., Čolović 2002) and popular songs (e.g., Hudson 2003).

In a period of dying supranational Yugoslav identity, the early successful story of McDonald's in Serbia supported the contention that modernisation did not lead to a major loss of national identity but, on the contrary, it invigorated national culture (Sznaider 2000).

9 Maksimir is the name of Dinamo Zagreb's stadium.

10 Available at: https://arhiva.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalnews/kako-je-otvoren-prvi-mekdonalds-u-srbiji--dogadaji-koji-su-menjali-srbiju-77/

VI. The 'I love you neither do I'[11] period

When Yugoslavia entered civil war in 1991, on the one hand, international and domestic (nationalist) politics fueled a cultural dilemma, strengthening the divisions that exist in diverse societies between 'nativists' or 'traditionalists' and 'westernizers' (e.g., Hnatiuk 2006; Dai 2005). On the other hand, McDonald's was probably the only 'window on the world' for Yugoslavs/Serbs given the huge economic and political sanctions and bans from international institutions. Going to McDonald's, the most well-known symbol of the American style of living, has grown to be a 'sign' that an individual from an ostracised and in-regression country is still in tune with the modern lifestyle.

> I remember a hypocritical comment from the time of the bombing addressed to a friend of mine 'what are you playing that American music for?', and the gentlemen probably have a German TV, white goods and other things in the house (M/39).

The year 1999 and the NATO bombing campaign contested Thomas Friedman's statement that 'no two countries that both had McDonald's restaurants had ever gone to war' (Friedman 1996). About a decade later, euphoria gave way to resentment directed towards American foreign policy when groups of angry people damaged McDonald's main facility in Belgrade. However, contrary to what happened in Russia, that is to say the closing of three restaurants in Crimea and calls from right wing leaders to shut down all of its outlets, which apparently concurred with a wider wave of anti-Westernism in the Russian Federation (Taylor 2014), there was no such a wave of anti-Americanism or Westernism in Serbia. It is possible that the attitude of franchise owners that branded franchise symbols, such as the golden arches, with Serbian ethnic symbols, such as the traditional Serbian cap called '*šajkača*', and transformed the lower-floor seating area of one of its facilities into a bomb shelter (Lynch 2012) contributed to appeasing some sort of 'cultural hooliganism' that materialised by the degradation of goods and materials belonging to a Western (but mainly American) cultural symbol.

This episode of violence mirrored a social malaise within Serbian society in relation to the world outside, a means to cope with cultural and political problems and take action against a desired but contested identity which had been built in the social imagination (see Bodin, Robène – Héas 2005), especially since the end of the 1980s.

In 2008 there is another milestone in McDonald's joint history with (contemporary) Serbia displaying a double face that is 'Americanization' and 'anti-

11 It is the title of a French popular song played in 1963 (Brigitte Bardot and Serge Gainsbourg).

-Americanism' (Vučetić 2013). By opening the first McCafé in Belgrade, McDonald's was again at the forefront of 'global/local modernities', that is, giving an international character to microcosmic practices (see Featherstone, Lash – Robertson 1995). Dragoš Pavićević, General Manager of McDonald's for Serbia, expressed it plainly: 'Serbia is known as a climate where you drink a lot of coffee. Here, life without coffee is quite empty, it is something more than a hot beverage. Coffee gives some charm to life, so for us, that part of the business is very interesting as a supplement to the offer of the existing McDonald's restaurants.'[12]

However, following Kosovo's declaration of independence of 17 February 2008, demonstrations and protests took place in Serbia. The Serbian government, through the prime minister Vojislav Koštunica, accused the United States of 'violating international law in favor of its own military interests' and added that 'as long as the Serbian people will exist, Kosovo will remain Serbian'[1]. On 21 February 2008, a group of around a hundred protesters headed from the U.S. Embassy to the downtown area, yelled slogans at the expense of Kosovo Albanians next to the building of the government of Serbia and ultimately vandalised the McDonald's restaurant located on Terazije (B92 2008).[13]

This was the last stand of a form of 'cultural hooliganism', embodied by the French director Chantal Akerman in her documentary *From the East* (1993), observing that Eastern Europe had always had a 'love/hate affair' with the West and particularly with America, that 'object of troubled desire' (Jelača, Kolanović – Lugarić 2017). However, none of the respondents stressed a form of 'depravation' of their country with the markers of Western capitalism such as McDonald's. This period devoted this American symbol as a receptacle of frustrations accumulated since the break-up of Yugoslavia, but is also viewed as a cultural and political metaphor through which the Yugoslav socialist legacy is conveyed (see Kolanović 2016). One of the interviewees summed up it unambiguously:

> 'When they opened a McDonald's [restaurant], I thought America was on our [Serbian] side. Little joke… I remember the queues; I had a great time there; I liked that it was self-service… and it was important that it was an American chain…' I told him that there were canteens with self-service before, but he said that 'at McDonald's, it was somehow better, more elegant, at a higher level! although there is no waiter' (Expert 2/52).

Interestingly, besides the fast-food chain KFC, which has opened several locations in Belgrade/Serbia since 2007, no other U.S. franchise has either transcended tumultuous periods or succeeded in Serbia: Pizza Hut closed its outlets

12 Available at: https://www.ekapija.com/news/293925/dragos-pavicevic-generalni-direktor-mcdonalds-restorana-za-srbiju-u-2010-ulazemo-vise

13 Available at: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008andmm=02anddd=17andnav_category=640andnav_id=285229

in 2012 after nine years of operation[14] and Subway has preferred to operate in Kosovo where there is a U.S. military base.

VII. Since 2008: bridging the 'ethnic East' and the 'civic West'[15]

From the 'ethno-national mythic discourse' that characterised Serbian society from the end of the 1980s, the previous decade saw a progressive move towards a 'soulless world of modern materialism and rationalism' (Čolović 2002: 7–8) to the extent that McDonald's was awarded the 'youth's favorite chain of restaurants in Serbia' prize in 2021.[16]

McDonald's is the only foreign company that has survived several territorial contractions (1991, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, among those firms that are part of citizens' daily lives both spatially as an enduring fragment of the urban environment and socially as a shared edifice of consumption rituals over the past thirty years, the U.S. franchise has maintained, to some extent, the continuity of the Serbian national idea after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

> 'McDonald's has been present in Serbia since '88, when I visited it for the first time with my parents, and it means 30 years of tradition to me' (M/39).

This assessment provides empirical evidence to the argument of Jovanović (2014) that Serbian citizens view their new state as an extension of the former Yugoslavia. In the course of action, the late years of Yugoslav socialism turned out to be a revived object of yearning for some respondents (see Todorova 2010).

> 'Yes. I'm going [to McDonald's]. Not only do I love the taste of junk food, but it also reminds me of a beautiful period of life' (M/36).

As McDonald's has become an integral part of residents' cultural memories, it adds to the contention that remembering and belonging are intimately related (Obradović 2016). Moreover, none lamented that McDonald's exists at the expense of local *kafanas* or restaurants. Indeed, several respondents do not consider buying local and going to McDonald's as mutually exclusive. When asked 'Is the origin / where does the brand you are buying come from / important to you? Yes / No, why?', one of them replied:

14 Available at : https://mondo.rs/Info/Ekonomija/amp/a267698/Pizza-Hut-u-Beogradu-propao.html

15 This refers to Kuzio's (2002) view about the 'ethnic-East/civic-West' divide: 'the proportional composition of a country's ethnic particularism and civic universalism has always been in tension and dependent not on geography but on two factors: the historic stage of the evolution from ethnic to civic state and nationhood and the depth of democratic consolidation' (p. 20).

16 Available at: https://www.bizlife.rs/mcdonald-s-je-omiljeni-lanac-restorana-mladih-u-srbiji/

> It certainly matters. First of all, one should buy domestic products in order to encourage the expansion of products, and thus the strengthening of the economy. In case there is a demand for brands that the domestic market cannot offer, I have nothing against buying them. I visit McDonald's a couple of times a year solely for a milkshake, and sometimes a burger (M/33).

In addition, McDonald's often acts as an inferred, not to say overt, point of reference at both the local and international levels. Domestically, the U.S. franchise serves as a metric for service quality (hygiene, staff kindness) standards.

> 'I don't go to McDonald's often, but since I pass by their restaurant on Zeleni Venac quite frequently, it happens that I eat something along the way. I love that their premises are always clean, and they have always kind workers' (F/60).

In an international scope, McDonald's outlets could act as a prism through which Serbs view or 'filter' the world outside their own cultural sphere.

> 'I go to McDonald's quite often, especially when I go out with friends. The best French fries in the world, and I love that they are always the same wherever you go. When I went to Germany to visit my aunt, I went exclusively to McDonald's because I'm quite picky about food and I don't like German cuisine' (M/20).

For better and for worse, from individualistic concerns about health ('No [I don't go to McDonald's] because I try to eat healthy', F/23) to a social gathering place for families ('I am often at Macdonald's [sic]; prices are not low but the service is always fast and I like that there is an area where children can play freely', F/31) and youth groups ('I mostly avoid McDonald's, although my friends love it and sometimes I go there because of them when we're already together. I don't like fast food, but I must admit that their ice cream is very good', M/34) and finally a social class reminder ('I go to McDonald's occasionally, when I come across some coupons, because it's quite expensive for me considering that a person can't have a full belly by eating their food. Their coffee is very lovely, and I like to sit in the garden to drink cappuccino when the weather is nice and I can afford it', F/64), McDonald's has propelled Serbs into 'new times', these changes that once formed Western 'material and cultural conditions of existence' (Hall 2006: 222–223). While the Yugoslav conflict ruined the unitary ideal constructed by Marshal Tito, McDonaldisation has 'recalibrated' Yugoslav socialism into the bitter daily reality of Western societies, shifting from the collectivist top-down wellbeing project to individualistic promises of material achievement which are increasingly sought after even for those with low purchasing power.

VIII. Conclusions

Without a state endorsement, nor calls for boycott[17] or buycott, the role that McDonald's has completed in citizens' everyday lives in the pre- and post-Yugoslav era was much more complex than acting just as a fast-food provider. The whole phenomenon of McDonaldisation has created a bond between past and an imagined future for Serbs, as well as a commitment to progress. The development of the U.S. franchise in this transition period illustrates one of the hidden and mainly uncovered aspects of the cultural war that was occurring between the Yugoslav republics and within the larger Balkan region. This article shows how the historical course of McDonald's in pre- and post-Yugoslav Serbia was and stays dominated by matters centred on what it means to be Serbian and provides a real-world example of the (symbolic) power of 'going to McDonald's' in forming senses of belonging in, at the same time, inclusive and exclusive terms. The development of McDonald's, under the rubric of identity building, has become more evident in the post-Yugoslav era. As such, it has expanded the conception of McDonaldisation.

Specifically, contrary to common assumptions, cultural articulations of capitalism as represented by McDonald's and Yugoslav socialism were not formed by the apparent exclusion of the other but was locally reinterpreted as Us/Serbs vs. Others/Croats, Montenegrins. Unlike Turkey and the launch of Cola Turka which aimed to surmount a sense of relative inferiority (Ozkan – Foster 2005), the consumption of McDonald's in Serbia 'materialized differences' (Berta 2019) between Serbs and other ethnic groups belonging to the (former) Yugoslav Federation.

Massively celebrated over more than three decades, the history of McDonald's in pre- and post-Yugoslav Serbia has defied the most optimistic forecasts. It also challenges theoretical assumptions that the U.S. franchise, as a capitalist symbol, is neither perceived as a form of neocolonialism nor that the neoliberal standardisation of core Balkan countries such as Serbia has failed (see Bjelić 2018). In a broader perspective and compared to Central European countries, Russia and/or China, McDonald's personified a form of post-communist capitalism that somewhat borrows from Central Europe's Western liberal model, Russian patrimonial approach and China's own unique way (see Szelényi – Mihályi 2019). It has accompanied drastic changes in the social fabric of the post-Yugoslav realm which has included global (re-)integration to the international community at least symbolically. The McDonaldisation of the Serbian society, predominantly conceived as a cultural process and less as an economic modernisation, correlates instead of opposes the 'Magna Carta' and the 'Magna

17 Unlike what happened in Hungary in the 1990s (see Harper 1999), there was no such anticorporate activism as a response to the local development of McDonald's or other foreign/Western well-known transnationals in Yugoslavia/Serbia.

Mac' (see Huntington in Betts 2010). In line with Jensen (2003), the 'newly' formed cultural identity embraces the beliefs and practices of one or more cultural groups that are, here, the East and the West (some are welcomed, and others rejected) thus echoing Yugoslavia's hybridity. Paradoxically, in parallel to nationalist state narratives, the chauvinist attitude that materialised in the early 1990s has widened the gap between the various ethnic groups and has certainly facilitated Serbia's 'national awakening' during Serbia's struggle for positioning itself in the international society while splitting Yugoslavism and Serbian national ideals (see Ejdus 2017).

At least implicitly, the McDonaldisation of Serbia has made an 'imagined community' to become reality, thus extending Anderson's (1991) contention about the importance of rational expression of capitalism for shaping national identity. This paper highlighted the role of consumption as another emanation of capitalism in breaking a unified but constructed national imagery into multiple cultural and ethnic groups.

Cultural hybridity was one of the founding pillars of the Yugoslav ideology, so the McDonaldisation of the Serbian society is not predominantly perceived as a form of cultural imperialism. Placed in a comparative perspective and although McDonald's has its supporters and detractors as the empirical study evidenced it, McDonaldisation had not led to a 'deauthentication' of local culinary culture like in the Czech Republic (Zeleny et al. 2020). Thus, the result of the McDonaldisation process that started in 1988 shows no primacy to traditions over global Western values but merges both, expressing the contradiction between rationality (valuing quality) and emotionality particularly when (symbolic) boundaries are at stake. Furthermore, Serbia's case goes beyond McDonald's' experience in Russia (see Caldwell 2004) and shares similarities with Japan for grasping the appropriation of, broadly speaking, America in Japanese culture (see Kawai 2009): one of the symbols of American culture (that is McDonald's) was significant for the 'reinvention' of Serbian cultural identity in the post-Yugoslav period, and the idea of America allows Serbia to act out the paradox of being both nationalist and oriented towards the West, i.e. open to the 'world outside' its regional sphere of influence.

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