Sounds of Resistance: A Socio-Political Critique of Post-war Croatia Through the Lenses of Music

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This chapter analyses the emergence and development of socially engaged music in Croatia during the post-war transition period from the end of the Homeland war until the present. A content analysis of fifty socially engaged songs by Croatian musicians will identify main themes concerning how socially engaged music reflected the social, political, and economic realities of this period. Following the content analysis, three major themes emerge: a critique of the corrupt and criminal system, a critique of society, and a critique of the Balkans in general. The findings suggest that socially engaged music in Croatia continues to be a valuable tool for addressing social and political issues in the country. The themes that emerge from the analysis highlight the ways in which socially engaged musicians in Croatia are using their music to call attention to important social issues and inspire change.

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Introduction

Musicians and artists have long used their work to call attention to social issues and to inspire movements for change. Music can capture emotions and experiences in a way that other forms of communication cannot (Robinson 2013, 2–8), and it can be a powerful tool for bringing people together and creating a sense of community around a cause. Most protests demanding social justice have musical soundtracks that are used to engage participants in their initiative(s) but also to signify and communicate protest.

I will focus on a particular historical and socio-political context in which socially engaged music in Croatia emerged and reflected the social, political, and economic realities of post-war Croatia from the end of the Homeland War until the present. By analysing the content of fifty socially engaged songs by Croatian musicians, I will show how socially engaged music in Croatia reflected upon the post-war transition period, which is an ongoing process. The analysis provides answers to these questions: What are the main topics and issues addressed by socially engaged music? What messages are sent by musicians via lyrics? What does content analysis of socially engaged music disclose about the present and future of socially engaged music in Croatia?

Music and social protest

When investigating the role of music in society, the fundamental question one must ask is why music matters in the first place, and what is its social value (Hesmondhalgh 2013). Music plays a multidimensional role in social life, serving as a powerful medium for emotional expression, social bonding, and cultural communication. By promoting shared experiences and group identity, it facilitates human contact and social cohesion (Schulkin and Raglan 2014; Saldanha 2009). From religious ceremonies to political movements, music is utilized in diverse social contexts, helping to manage relationships between individuals and collectives (Clayton 2016; Turino 2008). It also functions as a commodity within the social process, reflecting societal contradictions and market values (Adorno 1978). Furthermore, music aids in the regulation of emotions and the formation of self-identity, thereby contributing to personal well-being and enriching social interactions (Hargreaves and North 1999; Rentfrow 2012).Compared to some other forms of

art, like novels or films, music captures social changes at a faster pace, largely because the process of creation and the path from the artist to the audience is significantly shorter, making it more timely and relevant (Cvitanović 2009). A song's poetry and music can change reality, perhaps not instantly by resulting in changes in law, but by having a deeper impact on the society that makes the law (Friedman in Friedman 2013). Ramet (1994) presents music as the cause of political participation, stating that music is a powerful source of social and political change since it brings people together and evokes collective emotional experiences to which common meanings can be attributed.

Throughout history, music has been an efficient medium for engaging masses in political, social, religious, and other causes; for example, two significant artefacts bracket the history of African-American music in the 19th century: Richard Allen's *Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* and John and James Johnson's song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which became a coded statement of protest (Peretti in Friedman 2013). The term "protest music" often conjures images of great historical movements that were accompanied by music, such as with "La Marseillaise" in the French Revolution (Bickford 2014). Nowadays, rebellious political rhetoric can be found in many music genres such as hip hop, punk, rap, country, metal, and alternative rock.

From Yugoslav era to post-Yugoslav space

Popular music in Yugoslavia played an important, yet ambivalent role (Muršič 2017). It comprised an important part of the system since it served as a medium for the expression of dominant values, but it also represented a tool for confronting the system (Muršič 2017). In that sense, Yugoslav rock'n'roll can be viewed as a "distinct and important socio-cultural force in socialist Yugoslavia" (Mišina 2013: 1). It served the system in the form of propaganda, but it was also a tool for resisting that system in the form of anti-propaganda. Goran Bregović, leader of the Yugoslav rock band Bijelo Dugme (White Button), pointed out that in socialist Yugoslavia they did not have any alternative parties or any alternative organized politics; therefore, rock'n'roll presented one of the most important vehicles for helping people think in an alternative way (Ramet 1994).

The violent conflicts that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s marked a period of upheaval and suffering. The legitimization of war(s) and the struggle for independence was explained by the political elites through various forms of nationalist mobilization (Stojanović in Listhaug et al. 2010). Today, it is considered controversial to speak about socialist Yugoslavia in official discourse. It could be said that Yugoslavia has survived only in memory and in music (Muršič 2017). Even though Yugoslavia no longer formally exists on geographical maps, and even though nationalist and neoliberal ideologies of the successor states consider controversial the use of the terms *socialist* and *Yugoslavia* (Velikonja 2013), Yugoslav popular music is still vital and has clearly survived, and continues to provide fans with a consciousness of belonging to a cultural community that goes beyond the borders of the newly established countries (Mišina 2013). Many Yugoslav rock bands and performers became popular across Yugoslavia, and they survived the collapse of the country and its market (Muršič 2017). Nearly a decade after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, musicians from the former country started giving concerts outside the borders of their respective countries. The first comeback concerts held in Serbia after the war caused emotional reactions in the audience, primarily associated with feelings of nostalgia and Yugonostalgia (Muršič 2017).

Even now, three decades since the fall of Yugoslavia, nostalgia remains a prominent lens for interpreting and defining musical activities in the post-Yugoslav era, as noted by Hofman (2015). However, these feelings of nostalgia, often referred to as Yugonostalgia, are arguably much more linked to the present than they are to the past. Nostalgia can be interpreted as a subversive response towards an unjust present and an uncertain future (Velikonja 2008). Yugoslav music has survived the newly established borders, even though during the 1990s everything connected with the terms "socialist", and Yugoslavia was, in official discourse, considered subversive, controversial, and even forbidden. However, post-Yugoslav musical cooperation across the newly established borders has usually been perceived as "borne by nostalgic drives" (Hofman 2015), which implied that Yugoslav music had no emancipatory potential. Yugoslav cultural memory is usually considered a form of pure nostalgic escapism with no political potential within its interpretations as an emancipatory counter-discourse of resistance in the newly established nation-states (Hofman 2015). Yet, taking into account this notion of Yugoslav music as something purely nostalgic, and bearing in mind that in the dominant discourse in most Yugoslav successor states, Yugoslavism has been presented as something they do

not want to be linked with, the invocation of Yugoslavism contained in Yugoslav music is inevitably an expression of resistance and thus has emancipatory, subversive, and political potential. Additionally, Hofman (2015) discusses how theories of affect can provide new insights into how music is experienced and understood emotionally and socially, suggesting that music can evoke powerful emotional responses and shape collective identities. This perspective highlights the role of music in not only reflecting but also actively shaping social affect and cultural memory, thereby contributing to its potential as a form of resistance and political expression.

Socially engaged music in post-Yugoslav Croatia emerged and developed in the period after the end of the war, from 1995 onward. During the war, between 1991 and 1995, popular music played a key role in raising morale and providing a sense of unity and solidarity among the Croatian people. Many popular songs of the time were patriotic and spoke to the pride and resilience of the Croatian people in the face of war. Pettan (1998) suggested that there were three main functions of popular music in Croatia during the war: to encourage those who were fighting and those who were hiding from the enemy; to challenge and humiliate the enemy; and to call on those who are not directly threatened to become involved and provide help.

I will show that socially engaged music in Croatia arose from disillusionment with the failure of political leaders to deliver on their promises of change and progress. The collapse of Yugoslavia happened in the most dramatic way, marked by violence, conflict, and economic collapse, followed by a seemingly endless period of transition to liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism (Štiks and Horvat 2015). This transition was explained by political elites as something that would finally bring a long-awaited progress, peace, prosperity, and the desired return to the "European family" where Croatia always belonged. However, the emergence of liberal capitalism did not put an end to the poverty and underdevelopment of the entire region; instead, it deepened dependence on foreign capital, and imposed limited sovereignty and democracy (Unkovski-Korica 2015). This resulted, among other things, in hundreds of thousands of members of society slipping to the bottom of the social ladder and filling the social welfare offices and employment bureaus. In the social apocalypse that befell the country, many musicians found inspiration for socially engaged songs that described the environment in which they originated.

The emergence of socially engaged music in Croatia

The first musicians to address the post-war reality in their songs were mostly rap and hip-hop performers, starting with El Bahattee, Tram 11, Elemental, and Edo Maajka,[1] who reflected on the effects of the conflict and the challenges facing Croatian society in its aftermath. In addition to these post-war socially engaged musicians, some bands were active in the pre-war and war periods, including Hladno pivo (Cold Beer) and The Beat Fleat (TBF). All of them contributed to the socially engaged music scene in Croatia, and most are still actively performing.[2] Their songs express their perception and understanding of post-war Croatia and all the problems the country and its people have experienced as a result of the war and transition, followed by corruption and criminal activity. Over time, new generations of socially engaged musicians have emerged.

Like the musicians from the first period, these new songwriters address present-day socio-political issues, mostly with sarcasm and ridicule. The thematic focus of the newer songs no longer includes war topics, leaning more toward addressing current socio-political issues in new music genres influenced by global musical trends, with elements of trap music with specific local influences. The target audience for these songs includes the younger generations, those called *millennials*. I will analyse some of these songs by Vojko Vrućina and Kandžija.

I have used content analysis to detect the main themes of fifty socially engaged songs by eight different artists of the post-war period. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) point out, content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data. Lyrics for the content analysis were obtained using internet sources like Genius, tekstovi.net, and similar pages, as well as official musicians' websites.

The first step in the analysis consisted of decoding the jargon used in the songs and identifying general themes to detect specific patterns, which were grouped into descriptive codes. This led to the formulation of key concepts and categories to

[1] Even though Edo Maajka is a Bosnian native, he fled that country during the war and eventually came to Croatia, where he began to perform. In many of his songs, he addressed the situation in Croatia, although he often addressed the entire region (post-Yugoslav countries). However, I define him as a Croatian socially engaged musician. All his albums have been published by the Croatian publishing house, Menart.

[2] El Bahattee is no longer active (1997–2003), and Tram 11 was active from 1996 until 2003, and again from 2017 to the present.

detect specific phrases in the lyrics, identify similar patterns, and combine the songs into specific categories. The second step involved grouping the analysed text based on literal codes by analysing words in the songs that are expressed literally. The third step consisted of the reduction of both literal and descriptive codes to three main analytical codes that are not as firmly linked to the text but are rather identified by the subjective approach of the author.

Following the content analysis, three major themes emerged: a critique of the corrupt and criminal system, a critique of society, and a critique of the Balkans in general. The first theme is apparent in songs that criticize the system by calling out all actors involved in creating a corrupt and criminal system of government, from political elites, associated business entities, media corporations, organized crime, foreign-owned banks, and a corrupt judiciary. This theme can be further divided into three subthemes: a critique of the corrupt system and local political elite; cooperation between the political elite, business entities, tycoons, and the Church; and a critique of the current system by glorifying the former system of Yugoslavia. Some of the songs combine more than one subtheme.

Steal the money, come on, steal the money

The first subtheme is the largest, presented in songs that direct their criticism toward the corrupted system and the ruling elite. In "Steal the Money,"[3] Edo Maajka directly refers to the ruling elite, business entities associated with the ruling elite, tycoons, and war profiteers by satirically describing how the system works. The title of the song, "Steal the Money," reveals the intention, while the first repeated verses indicate Maajka's intention to criticize criminal activity by the ruling elite and its partners: "steal the money, come on, steal the money." Maajka continues by describing the process of corruption and criminal activity:

> A little bit of political parties, a few parliamentary sessions,
> Construction company, money is leaking.
> A little bit of battlefield, war profiteers, so what?

[3] Original title of the song: "Pokradi lovu."

These verses describe how the ruling elite and their associates[4] accumulate wealth through illegal activities. They are paid for their political positions, while they use those positions for various corrupt and criminal activities; often they are associated with construction companies and set up work for them, from which both parties share the profit. A verse about the battlefield and war profiteers sarcastically points out that many people used their position and gained wealth during the war by exploiting the political and economic circumstances created by war.

Similarly, in "The Croatian Greats,"[5] Tram 11 refers to a corrupt system whose existence is ensured by theft and malfeasance:

> Corruption, police, thievery, malfeasance,
> Same team, but a new system and inflation.
> If I don't get mine, then I will use force.

The first line refers to the ruling elite, including state institutions, as corrupt and prone to thievery and malfeasance. The second points to the fact that nothing changed after the collapse of Yugoslavia, since the politicians remained the same. The difference was that Croatia was no longer a socialist republic as the country transitioned to a market economy and multiparty system. The last line refers to the fact that in a country where the ruling elite is corrupt and prone to thievery, an ordinary person has no choice but to apply the same behavioural model if they want anything more than bare existence.

On a similar track, Edo Maajka addressed the corruption of the ruling elite and the struggle for the survival of ordinary people in "My Dear Government."[6]

> I would also like to go to the sea because my hands are burning with blisters.
> For euros, kunas, I would stay with you down in the island of Brijuni.

[4] "Associates" imply subjects connected to the political elite to conduct corrupt actions to accumulate wealth and power: war profiteers, founders and owners of business corporations and companies, the Church, etc.
[5] Original title: "Hrvatski velikani."
[6] Original title: "Dragi moj Vlado." Maajka is playing with words in this title. Vlado is a common male name, while Vlada means government. The song's message is directed toward the government, which is why the title is not translated literally.

Maajka is referring to the ease of being a politician in this region, since they enjoy their holidays on the island of Brijuni,[7] while ordinary people do hard physical work to survive and do not have the luxury of enjoying vacations by the sea, as politicians do. In the second line, Maajka asks politicians to hire him in Brijuni in some imaginary position, as they do with their trusted followers and cronies, because he would like to do nothing and get paid for it.

Similarly, in "Why Do I Have You?"[8] Elemental refers to the local political elite that rules manipulatively, deceptively, and corruptly and, through a network of collaborators, covers up every attempt to expose them:

> You entered the parliament, facilitated a construction permit for a foreigner,
> For him to get land and build a shopping center,
> You took a commission, and bought a flat in the city.

The song addresses the issue of a ruling elite that allows private investors to exploit public goods. Elemental points out that local politicians prioritize their own financial gain over the well-being of the community they were elected to serve, which erodes public trust and undermines the democratic process. Moreover, Elemental also shows how the elite finds a way to cover up all its illegal activities:

> Your function was at risk because of the investigation,
> and the affair of a shopping center built without a permit,
> you pulled the strings and everything was covered up,
> time heals the wound, and people forget quickly.

By blocking any attempt to expose their wrongdoing, the elite shields themselves from public scrutiny and accountability and perpetuates a cycle of corruption and abuse of power. This criminal activity is sustained by a web of relationships and favours which can leave those who speak out vulnerable to retaliation and harassment.

[7] For three decades, Brijuni was Tito's official residence. Afterwards, the Brijuni infrastructure continued to be used by Croatian presidents.
[8] Original title: "Zašto te imam?"

In another song, "Solidarity,"[9] Elemental points out that the ruling elite depends on the voters and that voters should stand up to them and fight for their rights. The voters hold the power to elect or reject the ruling elite:

> We created you, you are here for us,
> Invisible people raise their voices,
> This is not your private property, it is not your beautiful Homeland,
> And now the glass has been spilled.

The lyrics emphasize that it is the responsibility of voters to stand up for their rights and demand accountability from their elected officials. By voicing their concerns and holding their leaders accountable, voters can bring about change and ensure that their elected officials prioritize the needs of the people they serve. Voters must take an active role in their democracy and participate in the political process.

In the song, "Firm,"[10] Hladno pivo (Cold Beer) criticize the criminal privatization process that trampled the working class and enriched the new Croatian elite who used false promises of a new beginning.

> I take off my hat to all of us who still remember,
> The day when black limousines stopped in front of the firm
> And said: God, Homeland, Nation, everybody down, this is privatization.
> Make room for 200 families.

The song criticizes the non-transparent process of privatization in Croatia. The first two lines refer to the privatization process of large companies[11] that were once synonymous with success and development until privatization was largely reduced to filling the state budget and developing a primitive type of capitalism (Horaček and Nikolić, 2021). In this process, which favoured private investors at the expense of workers, thousands of employees worked an extended period without being paid, and thousands more lost their jobs. The last two lines refer to the narrative used to justify privatization, which was carried out under the guise of a new beginning, in the name of the Homeland and God, claiming that Croats deserved their own country, freed from Yugoslav one-mindedness. Instead, however, a few families

[9] Original title: "Solidarnost."
[10] Original title: "Firma."
[11] Usually, factories and other large production companies, including Kamensko, Dioki, Gredelj, Torpedo, Rikard Benčić, Dina Petrokemija and many more.

became rich and powerful, while the lives of most of the population were reduced to bare survival. The syntagm "200 rich families" refers to the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman, who said in one of his speeches[12] that there would be two hundred rich families in Croatia, and the rest would be their serfs, or, as Tuđman called them, small-toothed livestock.[13]

In "The Devil,"[14] The Beat Fleat criticize the arrival of foreign investors who exploit the Adriatic coast in collaboration with the local government at the expense of citizens and the local community:

> One spring morning, on a double-decker bus,
> With the first rays of the sun, the devil came into town.
> He sailed into the city with a 120-meter boat, then he announced via his vassals,
> That he plans to invest a lot of capital in the city.
> City leaders immediately came running, and they unanimously signed these big piles of paper.

The devil represents the foreign investor who decided to buy and exploit the land and resources with the approval of the local government, which, in turn, benefited financially from it. The increasing number of hotels and resorts on the Adriatic coast is causing concern among the residents, as it changes the character of the area. In addition to losing a public good that should serve the community, local authorities, following their own agendas, create fertile ground for foreign investors to make high profits while residents fill low-paid service jobs while the managers and similar better-paying positions are filled from abroad.

The Untouchable

Cooperation between the ruling elite, business associates, tycoons, and the Church is another common subtheme. In "Amen,"[15] El Bahattee questions the role of the Church and its involvement in state affairs:

[12] The attribution of this syntagm to Franjo Tuđman is questioned by some; nonetheless, it has become a symbol of Croatia's privatization process led by Tuđman, which left hundreds of thousands unemployed, hundreds of thousands of retirees trapped with almost worthless pensions, and enormous external debt.
[13] The original words that Tuđman used were: "Stoka sitnog zuba."
[14] Original title: "Vrag."
[15] Original title: "Amen."

> Is it faith in God or a machine for money laundering.
> Politics is a whore, but she wears such suits,
> Your preachers are disguised under the crucifix,
> They are involved in transitions, inquisitions, natality, and police affairs.

These lyrics point to the corruption and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and its involvement in financial impropriety, including money laundering and corruption. The song criticizes the Church's interference in politics, while the Church claims to promote values such as faith, love, social justice, and community. The Church's interference in state affairs raises questions about the separation of church and state, which is a fundamental principle of secular societies. In Croatia, historical ties between Church and state are strong, and the Church maintains a significant amount of power and influence over the population. Also, as the Catholic Church is a large organisation, it has a vast network of resources, and sufficient influence to sway political decisions in its favour.

In "Manipulation pt.1,"[16] The Beat Fleat criticise the connections between the Church, the ruling elite, their business associates, and tycoons by questioning the purpose of the country's battle for its independence:

> It takes a lot of Vaseline to be where I am, kneeling in front of open slits,
> Crooked mouth due to the configuration of other people's penises.
> I never had ideals and dreams, I know that anything is possible with enough money.

These lines denote that being a politician in Croatia involves an elevated level of unscrupulousness, spinelessness, opportunism, sycophancy, and lack of morals. "Crooked mouth" is a reference to the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman, because of his facial characteristic, and because he is considered one of the persons most responsible for having allowed and encouraged the criminal process of privatization in the country. The lyrics continue:

> Women are too strong, so boys turn me on.
> Anal investigator, master of the oral art.
> Shit without morals, this is what our battle gave us.

[16] Original title: "Manipulacija prvi dio."

These lines criticize the Catholic Church for condoning paedophilia. Finally, the song questions the purpose of the war, the killings, and thousands of people losing their homes and loved ones, since the result of the war is not prosperity, progress, and welfare, but corruption, crime, immorality, hypocrisy, and poverty.

In "The Untouchables,"[17] The Beat Fleat criticize the ruling elite who, in conjunction with their business associates and tycoons, corruptly shape the destinies of millions of people:

> I do not answer to my conscience, neither to people nor to God,
> I am the emperor of the world, first subordinate to God,
> And what should I be afraid of when I shape destinies.

These lines show that the ruling elite positions itself on the highest level of the hierarchy, which allows it to determine human destinies without consequences. The song continues:

> Let the strong rule, and let the poor whine,
> And let them pray to their gods.

These lines refer to the fact that the ruling elite in Croatia uses religion, nationalism, and other emotional appeals to distract the public from their own misdeeds and to maintain their hold on power.

Similarly, in "Minimal Risk,"[18] Edo Maajka points to bribery, corruption, and connections between the ruling elite and tycoons:

> Bribed judges, ties are pulling, I'm lining up my people to make the law for me.
> Across the river Sava, I smuggle cigars when I need cash,
> Two or three tow trucks, hidden under the canvas, a tycoon of tycoons, and a diamond in my teeth.

Maajka points out that tycoons use their power and influence to engage in unethical and illegal activities to maintain their position of influence and control and to gain more wealth. Moreover, they leverage their wealth and power to influence political

[17] Original title: "Nedodirljivi."
[18] Original title: "Minimalni rizik."

decisions that favour their own interests over the public good. Such practices undermine the democratic process and erode public trust in government, increase inequality, and reduce transparency and accountability.

We all loved him

A third subtheme appears in songs that criticize the current system by glorifying Yugoslavia. In "We All Loved Him,"[19] Hladno Pivo portrays life in Yugoslavia as a time when life was different and better, and when Tito was a leader whom everyone admired:

> We all loved him, except for those in prison,
> We wrote long compositions, what is more beautiful, Him or the spring?
> The greatest son of his people, he was our father, mother, God,
> We admired him from below.

In the first line, "except for those in prison," the song refers to political dissidents who were imprisoned, which points out totalitarian aspects of the former Yugoslavia. However, it is important to highlight the complex nature of Yugoslavia, which made it difficult to classify it into either of the prevalent political systems in Europe at that time (Ionescu and Madariaga 1968; Fisk 1971; Linz and Stepan 1996; Ramet 2006; Flere 2014); these authors question the characterization of Yugoslavia as a totalitarian regime, although this does not mean that there were no elements of a totalitarian regime. Hladno Pivo remind us that repression existed in some form in Yugoslavia, while emphasizing that Tito was a charismatic leader adored by the Yugoslav people:

> We lived well, somehow differently, western, more eastern.
> And we all cried when our greatest comrade died.

In these lines, Hladno Pivo emphasize that Yugoslavia was a unique country in many ways. It positioned itself as a non-aligned country, developed its own brand of socialism, and emphasized a policy of neutrality. The lines claiming that people lived "western, more eastern" refer to the country's balanced relationships with both the Soviet Union and the United States, while also maintaining autonomy for

[19] Original title: "Svi smo ga mi voljeli."

Yugoslavia, which allowed for a certain level of independence and freedom in foreign policy decision-making. When Tito died, it was a deeply emotional moment for many Yugoslavs. People from all levels of society, factory workers to intellectuals, mourned his passing, since he was perceived as the leader who had brought stability and prosperity to their country. Apart from the political prisoners, obviously.

Elemental, in "He's Gone,"[20] criticizes the current political and economic situation in sovereign and independent Croatia by glorifying life during Yugoslav times:

> My parents easily found their first job,
> No one was unemployed with a university degree.
> No one lacked food,
> They were happy in their small flat, secure job, seniority, and pension.

Elemental highlights the fact that the socialist system provided job security for many people as there was a high level of public ownership. Also, as pointed out in the second line, the unemployment rate in Yugoslavia was relatively low, compared to other countries in the region. In addition, there was a relatively low level of income inequality, as the government implemented policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting a more even distribution of wealth. In comparison,

> Today are different times, there are no jobs, everyone manages as they know how,
> They either sit unemployed or pay bribes for a job,
> In a rented apartment with an undeclared salary, without any security, and a head full of confusion.

These lines describe life in Croatia today, highlighting the poor socio-economic situation, high unemployment rate, elevated level of bribery, poor living standards, as well as the uncertain future.

> The past smiles at us with tired eyes,
> And the air smells of nostalgia.

[20] Original title: "Nema ga."

These lyrics are rooted in a sense of nostalgia for the socialist period, which provided a sense of stability and security for many. Today, after years of violence, conflict, and economic collapse, followed by a period of transition to liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism, which were described by the ruling elite as long-awaited progress, peace, and prosperity, it seems for many that the past times were much better. Glorifying the socialist system and society that existed during Yugoslav times, while criticizing the current political and economic situation, are among the main themes of "Yugonostalgia."

However, it is important to remember that nostalgia for the Yugoslav past is not only nostalgia for everyday life, but also for something that never existed in such a form (Luketić 2013). As Velikonja points out (2008), by expressing nostalgia, one seeks for a utopian society and an imaginary country. Therefore, nostalgia for socialist Yugoslavia is a form of political opinion and a manifestation of political activism on what a just and ordered society should look like, which, in fact, was never the case in Yugoslavia.

Only in this region

Another main theme in socially engaged Croatian songs is the critique of society's predominant patriarchal and religious values, petty-bourgeois mentality, defeatism, and consumerism, a society so focused on the past that it is unable to move forward. In "Nature and Society,"[21] Elemental argues that Croatian society is patriarchal, poor, overly religious, and prone to national euphoria:

> That is our nature and society,
> May a child be born, but may it be male.

These lines refer to the importance placed on having a male child, as it is still seen as a source of pride and a way to carry on the family name and legacy, revealing that Croatian society is still very traditional and that gender roles prioritize male heirs.

> We scream and go wild when we score the goal,
> God and Homeland is all we have.
> Nature here is beautiful,
> But society is screwed up.

[21] Original title: "Priroda i društvo."

These lines highlight the importance of football as a source of national pride that provides joy, excitement, and a feeling of belonging to a community. Football can also be viewed as a way for people to escape from the reality and hardships of everyday life. The line "God and Homeland is all we have" denotes that the ruling elite often uses these imaginary values and symbols as a diversion from the real problems in the country, including corruption, crime, poverty, brain drain, and a low standard of living.

In "How come?"[22] Vojko Vrućina criticizes a specific Croatian mindset that prioritizes making money quickly and easily above creating value or quality:

> I opened a fast food next to another fast food,
> My menu is worse, but my prices are higher,
> Everyone eats their food, and nobody wants to eat mine.
> How come?

Vrućina caricatures entrepreneurial incompetence. This mentality is sometimes referred to as the "get-rich-quick" mindset, or how to make fast money, and can be seen as a product of the challenging economic and social conditions that have faced Croatia. Poverty can undermine the development of the "spirit of capitalism" described by Weber (2005), which emphasizes the importance of hard work, diligence, and self-discipline in pursuing financial success. According to this view, poverty can make it difficult for individuals to cultivate these virtues, as they may lack access to education, training, and other resources that could help them develop the skills and attitudes necessary for success in a capitalist system, leading to the development of the "get-rich-quick" mindset. The song continues to highlight specific aspects of an average Croat's mentality:

> Is it possible that someone is sabotaging me and lobbying against me?
> Maybe it's the government, maybe it's the Serbs, maybe it's the Masons.

These lines ridicule the mindset where, after every failure, one looks for someone else to blame. The lines also refer to the popular internal and external enemies of Croatian society, the government, and Serbs. This alludes to the fact that Croatian society is still deeply immersed in a kind of war mentality, as well as hatred towards

[22] Original title: "Kako to?"

their neighbouring Serbs, although years have passed since the war ended. "Masons" is a symbol of conspiracy theorists. By referring to the Masons, the song alludes to economic insecurity, mistrust of authority, and a cultural belief system somewhat based on traditional beliefs and superstitions as determinants of Croatian society, which often leads to lack of exposure to critical thinking skills, scientific reasoning, and analytical tools (Swami et al. 2011; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015).

Croatian hip hop performer Kandžija ridicules life in a small mainland town in the song titled "Donji Miholjac":[23]

> I grew up in Miholjac, and I will always love it,
> If I succeed here, then I can succeed everywhere.

These lines are an allusion to the Alicia Keys song "Empire State of Mind," which implies that if one succeeds in New York, they can succeed anywhere, transferring it to the context of a small Croatian town, Donji Miholjac, thus emphasizing a situation completely opposite to that of the urban and developed environment that teems with possibilities in New York. This underscores that Croatia's rural areas are facing economic underdevelopment, demographic challenges, infrastructure deficits, lack of natural resource management, and a lack of political representation, which leads to a vicious cycle of economic, social, and cultural stagnation and, ultimately, brain drain.

The night of roasted oxen

The presence of war topics in socially engaged Croatian songs is common. Those songs and musicians are vocal in their critique of the lingering effects of war on Croatian society and have called for a more inclusive and progressive approach to social issues.

Elemental, in the song "Balkana,"[24] criticizes a society that is still immersed in the past, with war, hatred, and intolerance, while the generations whose childhood was irreversibly destroyed by war now have the task of rebuilding that society from scratch:

[23] Original title of the song and name of a small town in continental Croatia.
[24] Original title: "Donji Miholjac."

> Our childhood would have been different if the guns hadn't rattled
> This is a land of wounds and empty promises.
> Twenty years later and you still want to shoot, and put in your pocket what the people created.
> We, the younger ones, must create anew, everything starts from scratch for us,
> Let's roll up our sleeves, we no longer have dreams because of our past.

The first line refers to the fact that children who grew up in conditions of war do not have the same starting position as those who spent their childhood in peace, as should be the case for everyone. This generation still lives in a society that is grappling with the legacy of the past, including the scars of war, the persistence of ethnic tensions, and the challenges of rebuilding social and economic infrastructure. "Let's roll up our sleeves" calls for motivation for that generation, which is tasked with the responsibility of rebuilding society and promoting greater social cohesion and tolerance while confronting the challenges of economic inequality, unemployment, and political corruption.

In "The Night of Roasted Oxen 91'," [25] El Bahattee depicts a war-time and post-war Croatian society that is immersed in crime and corruption, which was made possible by the circumstances of war, creating a class of tycoons, on the one hand, and an impoverished populace, on the other, on whose backs the tycoons continued to enrich themselves, in cooperation with the ruling elite:

> Sirens blared for days, I lost school, I lost education.
> Today I look at the youth and the nation, their parents are commandos, the 91' hinterland.
> In the trench in front of the factory, they were lurking positions, stocks and factories.
> Work force at the minimum wage, they still haunt us today.

The first line shows that many people lost normal opportunities in life, including the right to education and the right to a normal childhood because of war events in the country. On the other hand, a small class of tycoons and wealthy individuals were, in cooperation with the ruling elite, able to accumulate significant wealth and power. In the post-war privatization process, those individuals took advantage of the powerful position that they had acquired during the war and continued to exploit the post-war situation for (political) positioning and further enrichment, buying factories and large companies for bargain prices. They used the workers for their

[25] Original title: "Noć pečenih volova 91'."

own advancement and enrichment then destroyed those factories by their poor management, leaving thousands of workers without jobs.

On a similar track, Elemental's "Day by Day"[26] questions the purpose of the Homeland War in Croatia, since the result of the battle for independence was poverty, debt slavery, injustice, corruption, and a struggle for bare existence:

> Days of pride and glory, and minus on the bank account.
> We were left without everything, it hit us too suddenly.
> Who even knows what happened overnight.
> While we were surviving, things in life got more expensive.
> There is no justice to protect us, no honest government, all of them are converts.
> Promises are cheap and life is so expensive, so the role models are criminals, which makes sense, people are not stupid.

These lines describe a post-war Croatia that may have gained its independence and sovereignty, but the question we are left with is whether that was worth the cost in human loss and socio-economic decline. The war left many parts of the country with poor infrastructure, weak institutional support, and corruption, and it contributed to a significant brain drain as many people left the country in search of better opportunities elsewhere. In such conditions, when there is widespread lack of trust in institutions resulting from the high level of crime and corruption, along with poor living standards, it is not surprising that criminals become role models, because they demonstrate how one can manage in a country where it is difficult to earn an honest living.

Tracksuit and a leather jacket

The third main theme of socially engaged Croatian songs is a critique of the Balkans as a wild and dangerous place, a space of hatred and corruption, patriarchy, and chauvinism. In "Tracksuit and a Leather Jacket,"[27] Kandžija depicts the stereotype of a typical Balkan male as an ignorant petty-bourgeois person who wants to be perceived as a "civilized European":

[26] Original title: "Iz dana u dan."
[27] Original title: "Trenerka i kožnjak."

> The upper part is leather jacket on a bare skin,
> I unbutton myself nicely, show my belly.
> Leatherette tracksuits and leather jackets,
> I get from Jože, my girlfriend's brother's godfather.
> I wear the same as Europe, and I don't care,
> While others have a crisis, I have the best time ever.

The reference to a leather jacket and a tracksuit was probably intended to indicate a lack of civility, manners, and style, and, generally, to portray the Balkan male as a barbarian who is involved in illegal activities, such as reselling stolen goods, which makes him financially stable, in comparison to people who earn an honest living and struggle for bare survival. Moreover, by wishing to wear clothes that are worn in Europe, the speaker indicates an inferiority complex and a wish to belong to Europe, not the Balkans.

On a similar note, in "Hey Slavs,"[28] Elemental criticizes the Balkan region as an area of hatred, war, and excessive religiosity, where people desire to break free from those shackles and become "citizens of the world":

> Sorry for carrying all that baggage,
> that I am unpacking in front of you in Strasbourg and The Hague. Let me be a citizen of the world, unencumbered by the yoke of Balkan identity.
> And understand that what I wear is not mine, those national colours are painted by others
> Hey Slavs, your fires still burn, they don't let me breathe.
> I would draw a line and start over.
> And to hell with your doctrines and our great leaders, and all this is gnawing at me, it is gnawing at me to the bone.
> A man without a nation, a man without an emblem, a man without an anthem is a man without a problem.

These lines indicate the affliction of the Balkan region with war, hatred, nationalism, and various ideologies and the need for people to free themselves from these shackles and become citizens of the world, without the Balkan label, neutral, and freed from the burden of the Balkans. To some extent, the Balkan region has deservedly received the title of "powder keg." Through the 100-year period of the 20th century, this region went through many wars and conflicts. For this reason, the main topic of many Croatian songs is war, and the consequences of war, hatred, and

[28] Original title: "Hej Slaveni."

despair. In these lyrics, the image of the Balkans is barbaric, sad, and depressing, while war, barbarism, and hatred often become the most important and most common determinants of the entire region. War is often portrayed as something usual and timeless, and the Balkan region is described using precisely those determinants. However, it is important to point out that in this narrative of the Balkans as the bloody beginning of the 20th century, it is often forgotten and/or ignored that the entire history of Europe is filled with war and conflict (Luketić 2013). The history of Europe is interpreted in the spirit of the Enlightenment, as a constant progression towards democratic values and ideal civil societies, and on that path, war and violence are often considered necessities.

Building a better future

The changes that took place in Croatia at the beginning of the 1990s represent a significant turning point in the country's history. The fall of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war led to a complete change in the economic, social, and political structure of the country. This period was marked by great losses, from jobs and properties to identities and lives.

Socially engaged music has played a significant role during the post-war period, capturing the mood of the time and reflecting the experiences and struggles of ordinary people. It still has a vital role, as it helps give voice to those who would otherwise be marginalized and provides a platform for people to express their frustrations and hopes. Moreover, it plays a key role in holding political actors accountable for their actions. By publicly calling out corruption, deception, and crime, it can expose the dark underbelly of the political system and demand greater transparency and accountability from those in power. It has the power to speak to society in terms of accepting all the positive and negative aspects of the region they live in and recognizing that the Balkan region is much more than a "powder keg" of violence and instability. By acknowledging the full complexity of the region's history, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of the unique challenges and opportunities facing the Balkans today, and socially engaged music can play a significant role in that process.

Socially engaged music can address social, political, economic, and cultural problems and to send empowering messages to its audience. Its power lies in the fact that it can be used to challenge dominant ideologies and power structures (Frith 2007), and it will likely continue to serve as a potentially important tool for addressing social issues and promoting social change in the country in the years to come. By giving a voice to the marginalized and oppressed, by addressing new and emerging social issues, and by participating in shaping public opinion, it will continue to be a vital force for positive social change in Croatian society.

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