

Anticipating the “Blocked Future”: Transitions to Adulthood and Migration Aspirations
in Serbia

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Adviser: Teresa Gowan

May 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is a product of the support, mentorship, friendship, and generosity of many people.

I would like to first thank my interlocutors, who kindly took the time to share their thoughts (often with a complete stranger) and allowed me a view into their lives, hopes, frustrations, and aspirations. Without them, this dissertation would not exist. Though we may not agree on all of my conclusions in this text, I hope that I have portrayed your perspectives accurately and have done justice to your hopes for a better world – however we may come to it.

For the work of my brilliant advisor, Teresa Gowan, there are almost no words to summarize my gratitude. She has been a source of infinite intellectual support throughout this process, taking countless hours to talk through my ethnographic hunches, push my analyses, and carefully comb through and point out every poorly written sentence. I have known her since I was 18 years old and owe most everything I know as a sociologist to her efforts as a teacher and mentor. Her sharp intellect and quick wit rarely fail to leave me in awe, even today. I look forward to many more years of collaboration and debate, and I promise to be slightly less argumentative in the future as, I now formally admit, she is often right.

My committee members, Joshua Page, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, and Joe Soss, have been a wonderful source of insights, new literatures, and, admittedly, emotional support throughout the years. Their collective relaxed attitude towards academia combined with a fierce sense of theoretical and methodological rigor has made what is often an anxiety-inducing process bearable, and even enjoyable. I owe much to the enthralling theory courses I took with them in my early graduate studies; though I had not initially intended to delve so much into states and social policy when I first began this project, this dissertation is a testament to the mark they have left on my intellectual development and ways of seeing.

I likewise thank Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden for serving as my mentors-in-the-Balkans and mentors-on-the-Balkans through their generous comments and advice over the course of the last two years. Their encouragement made me feel confident in the work I was doing, while their perspectives from outside of the discipline of sociology provided invaluable insights into how to approach these analyses.

A dissertation further spans beyond the text presented and the research that contributed to it; it is a culmination of experiences which predate it and happened alongside it. The University of Minnesota Department of Sociology has been a wonderful place to take on this research, and I am grateful to the supportive administrative staff and professors who continuously labor to make our work possible, and my fellow graduate students who work to make the department a community of support. I was very lucky to begin my PhD program with a cohort of brilliant people who variously provided friendship, advice, feedback, many late-night conversations about the meaning of our field, and comradeship in our shared goals of creating a more just and equitable world: Jack Delehanty, Carolyn Fraker, Lisa Gulya, Jasmine Trang Ha, Erin Hoekstra, Shi-Rong Lee, Rahsaan Mahadeo, Alex Manning, Rebecca Maung, Joseph Svec, and j. Siguru Wahutu. Elizabeth Boyle and Miriam King were fantastic mentors who provided a second home at the U outside of the Sociology Department, while allowing me the flexibility to pursue my early dissertation research while working on the IPUMS-DHS project at the Minnesota Population Center. There, I was fortunate to be in the company of fellow graduate assistants Kevin Huang and Joseph Svec, who patiently walked me through the quantitative social sciences many years ago and opened my mind to new ways of thinking. Outside of these semi-formally constituted groups, I am thankful to my motley crew of ethnographer friends, Yağmur Karakaya, Aras Köksal, Anuradha Sajjanhar, and Madison Van Oort (as well as cohort members Carolyn Fraker and Erin Hoekstra) who have provided immense amounts of feedback on my project and writing throughout its stages. Outside of the University of Minnesota, many thanks to Ruth Trumble and Arandel Bojanović for the writing company and humorous philosophical debates in Belgrade's cafes, and notably to Kevin Kenjar, with whom these last few months of working hard to finish our dissertations and keep each other on pace has been much less lonely than it otherwise would have been.

I am especially grateful to my friends in Belgrade, whose unreserved friendship, insights, and help in navigating everyday life made me want to live in the city. Marko, Milica, Miloš, Natalija, Nina, Selena, and Sonja, thank you for variously putting up with my incessant questions, talking through my research hunches, and explaining everything to me slowly, literally and figuratively, in my first couple years here. Thanks to Nena and Baćko for being a vital source of support while regaling me with stories from a lifetime ago of our families' trips to Jahorina. I am forever indebted to the woman who named me, my godmother Rada, who helped in every way possible and immediately made me feel like family despite spending over 20 years living on different continents.

Finally, I thank my parents, Lejla and Goran, and my sister and brother-in-law, Dijana and Rashad, who have always provided me with a home to return to, both physically and mentally, and show all of the positive aspects of Balkan familial "sacrifice": unconditional love, care, mutual support, and good food. I thank my partner Stefan, who has filled this role in Belgrade and made the city feel like home, while being patient enough to listen to every good and bad idea and kind enough to read every chapter.

Although the good parts of this dissertation owe much to the many people who helped along the way, all mistakes are mine.

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INTRODUCING THE “BLOCKED FUTURE”

As I prepared to give a talk on my dissertation to my department in November 2019, Miloš messaged me to tell me he had returned to Belgrade from one of his many stints working on cruise ships. When I told him that I was in Minneapolis preparing to present on “how Serbians think about the future,” he joked that I should, “show empty slides and have the PowerPoint presentation beamed by a crooked projector, and that’s our future.”

Futures have become somewhat of an obsession of our time (Adams, Murphy & Clarke 2009; Stephan & Flaherty 2019). A little more than a decade ago, the future as an object of study was largely relegated to economists (Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2016), epitomized perhaps in the “futures” trading marked by the rise of financialization, which led to the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 (Krippner 2011). However, social scientists and humanities scholars have recently come to the fore and developed their own conceptualizations of the productive power of imaginations of the future (Adams et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1998; Stephan & Flaherty 2019; Bryant & Knight 2019; Beckert 2016; Appadurai 2013; Guyer 2007), made calls to research the future empirically (Appadurai 2013; Gans 2016), and responded to these calls in the many recent of studies of how the future presents itself in everyday lived experience (cf. the collection of works edited by Hann & Parry 2018). In some of these works, the imagined future has been theorized as a realm of affect (Appadurai 2013) which provides spaces of agency (Cuzzocrea 2018; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016; Mandich 2018; Brun 2015), hope and fear (Appadurai 2013; Cook 2016a, 2016b; Bryant & Ellard 2015), shapes “imaginative horizons” (Crapanzano 2004), operates as a source of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), or, as in my own case, emerges as an amalgamation of the complex feelings around *not having a future* (Allison 2013) which has come to mark some post-industrial societies.

Modernity was radically future-oriented, while the Cold War operated as a sort of “battle for the future” between Soviet socialism and Western capitalism. Left intellectuals were thus infuriated by the triumphalist claims of the right following the fall of the socialist bloc, notably in the form of Fukuyama’s (1992) proclamation that the fall of the Soviet sphere was the “end of history” and Margaret Thatcher’s assessment that “There Is No Alternative” to neoliberalism (Goonewardena 2003). Certainly the fact that “There Is No Alternative” does not mean that there is no longer a desire for an alternative. However, the left has struggled to introduce such an alternative at a mass scale (ibid.), finding it hard to either conceptualize a future *within* current political-economic configurations or to imagine a future *outside* of them (Beckert 2019).

Without such macro-political liberatory horizons, Appadurai writes of the future as a core underlying structure of global inequality today: “To most ordinary people—and certainly to those who lead lives in conditions of poverty, exclusion, displacement, violence, and repression—the future often presents itself as a luxury, a nightmare, a doubt, or a shrinking possibility” (2013:299). He notes that this “affective crisis” likewise “inhabits a geography that is not uniform, planetary, or universal,” (ibid.) meaning that imagined futures, whether hopeful or dystopian, are not evenly distributed across the globe. The future itself is an unequal terrain.

For those who see the future as a “luxury, a nightmare, a doubt, or a shrinking possibility” (Appadurai 2013: 299), Appadurai emphasizes the political importance of inculcating and maintaining the collective “capacity to aspire”: to project oneself into the future, to continue to desire a locally-contextualized concept of a ‘good life’, and to imagine routes to such a good life (193). This capacity to aspire, he argues, likewise promotes an *ethics of possibility*, “ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizon of hope” in contrast to an *ethics of probability* which centers itself in risk, calculability, and the profit-making of catastrophe and disaster found in “casino capitalism” (295). In this sense, hope is not a politics that is oblivious to obstacles (Crapanzano 2004); hope is instead “absent when people are unaware of the political tools by which social change can be forced, when they know that those tools are inaccessible, or when the available tools have been seen to fail” (Sanchez 2018:236).

My question in this dissertation is, in part: how does Serbia, a place so recently laden with embracing new (European) futures, come to be seen as “not having a future”? What does “futurelessness” in this particular context mean? While most manifestations of modernity have been future-oriented, socialism was even more so, with its constant exhortations for citizens to physically and ideologically “build a better future” (Erdei 2013; Štiks 2015). Considering this ideological future-orientation of the socialist past, to say a post-socialist country does not “have a future” represents a denial of the “promissory legitimacy” of neoliberal capitalism (Beckert 2019) as implemented through Europeanization processes.

Many Serbians – especially the 50 to 70 percent of younger people who are considering emigrating from the country (Tomanović & Stanojević 2015; Mojić & Petrović 2013) – echo Appadurai’s analysis of geographically unequal futures. They see some countries as offering their citizens “futures,” and the capacity for agentic action which accompanies future-making (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bourdieu 1998). Serbia, conversely, belongs in the zone of places “without a future.” If they stay, they are doomed to an indefinite prolongation of the increasingly “extended present” (Nowotny 1994) marked by ongoing precarity and feelings of “stuckedness” (Rajković 2018).

For young Belgradian Ivan, the doubt-filled “blocked future” presents itself as “those moments when you finally have a concrete situation, where your efforts are futile, that you didn’t get something you deserved, [...] when some people wait for an operation for 7 days while others wait a year. That’s when you return to that feeling of, ‘I should get out of here.’” The problem with living in Serbia is not just living under poverty, he says, but the stifling unfairness that has developed with this mass impoverishment. Namely, that the use of familial and political connections to navigate increasingly scarce resources within the public sphere has crept into every institution. The resulting “concrete situations” of inequality travel from the mundane, such as a rigged high school competition, to the life-threatening, like preferential access to a needed surgery. In imagining a life abroad compared to his potential future in Serbia, Ivan says,

Somehow I can’t make peace with the idea that in 10 years I’ll have some higher wages which *today* represent some amount with which you could live decently. But

it's a big question mark whether that will happen. Maybe it'll happen, but maybe it won't. Somehow I have a feeling that, abroad, people who are ready to work hard, [...] who don't have to be *exceptional*, but simply just hardworking, [...] that they won't become rich, but they'll – I think they'll have enough money and the conditions to live a decent life. And to be able to afford sometimes some nice things, which we all in principle need.

In feeling entitled to a decent life of basic security and some “nice things” without having to be “exceptional,” Ivan evokes the capacity to aspire, to not “make peace” with the “question mark” of “*maybe*” of one day earning wages that provide a basic minimum (but only if inflation does not shift the cost of living). This definition of a decent life invokes the revolutionary protest demand of “bread and roses,”¹ of not simply being entitled to survive, but to be able to enjoy life as well. As such, an imagined life abroad for Ivan provides hope that this form of “decent life” still exists somewhere.

In combining the varied and seemingly unrelated inflections of “blockedness” and “futurelessness” in Serbia, I show the existence of a coherent “structure of feeling” (Williams 2009), an emergent way of thinking appearing as a “popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary or other cultural contexts” (Buchanan 2010:455). The “blocked future” discourse is a critique of the future of Serbia as it's developing today, a structure of feeling shaped by histories of the “normal life,” global and local political processes such as transition and Europeanization, and disappointment in the contemporary status quo.

The structure of feeling shaping my interlocutors' desire for a “decent life” or “normal life” (cf. Jansen 2015; Greenberg 2011) can perhaps be read as a “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013). Appadurai (ibid.:183) frames his argument of the capacity to aspire as akin to Hirschman's (1970) “voice,” that is, protest for change. Yet this capacity to aspire can only be enacted as an emigratory “exit” when left with so few effective routes to “voice” (ibid.).

¹ “Bread and roses” has been used among a multitude of left movements, but it is generally most associated with the 1912 Lawrence Textile Workers strike, now often referred to as the “Bread and Roses Strike,” where protest signs allegedly demanded “We want Bread, and Roses too!” (Sinclair 1915).

Certainly emigration is typically enacted on an individual (rather than collective) level, but surely we may also read local migration *discourse*, the *whys* of migration, as such a “voice” or capacity to aspire; a culminating structure of feeling that says “something is wrong,” and refuses to participate, even while not knowing how to change it. It is perhaps best understood as a capacity to aspire without a yet-articulated collective horizon of hope in the domestic context. Instead, the horizon of hope is transposed onto imagined lives abroad.

Considering that most aspiring emigrants likely will *not* move out of Serbia², however, my question was *why* so many people are talking about emigration, *how* it is talked about, *what* are the reasons they state for (potentially) leaving, and *how* do their understandings of life abroad shape the frame through which they see their lived experiences in their home country.

Within migration discourse, an aspect of *desire* – of what people want from a migration, or why they intend to undertake it – also tells us much about the “sending country” and the social context of its potential emigrants (Carling & Collins 2018; Johnson 2019a). In the Serbian case, the foundational desires within the migration discourse are for steady work in a calling (Chapter 1), home ownership (Chapter 2), a “normal” life for hypothetical or real children (Chapter 3), and, overall, a state which provides a structure for moral personhood under the rhetoric of “order” or “organization” (Chapter 4). In analyzing these constructions of imagined “normal” lives (Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2015), I work to illuminate the cultural structures (Hall 2000; Gowan 2010) – values, beliefs, and social norms that emerge as an interplay between culture, agency, and institutions (Carson 2001) – which undergird Serbian post-socialist society: namely, the conflict between the goals of a right to stable work with a living wage and independent housing, on one side, and the material impoverishment people face as understood through narrative tropes of a “Balkan

² As Ivan told us, often thoughts about emigration come up when one is faced with a concrete situation of something being “futile,” demonstrating the use of migration discourse as an affective possibility of choice when one feels left without choices. While most young Serbians state that they have thought about leaving, few have made plans for how to do so (Mojčić & Petrović 2013). However, this non-migration also does not mean that people are not leaving, but that they are not leaving at the rate they report an intent to: broad estimates from EU visa regimes state that about 30 to 60 thousand people leave Serbia each year for the EU alone, the equivalent of a medium-sized town and a significant amount for a country of 7 million people (if we were to transpose this emigration to population dynamic to the US, it would be as though 2.3 million Americans left each year).

mentality” (Brković 2017) and the dysfunctional state “partocracy” which hinder these goals, on the other. I take note of how these cultural structures frame what it means to be “independent” in the post-Yugoslav context, how meanings of independence have shifted with the new economic and social context, and how they are transposed onto imagined lives abroad. In doing so, I follow Stoler (2010) in taking on Foucault’s call to a genealogy of sentiment. As Foucault says, feeling may be universal, but every sentiment has a history (Foucault 1984:87). Though we tend to assume the permanence of sentiments, “a knowledge of history easily disintegrates this unity, depicts its wavering course, locates its moments of strength and weakness, and defines its oscillating reign” (ibid.).

The sentiments behind a “normal life,” thus, were forged within a particular history, and have shifted with the transition from socialist Yugoslavia to neoliberal Serbia. The chapter “Futurelessness, migration, or a lucky break: narrative tropes of the ‘blocked future’ among Serbian high school students” shows how the Yugoslav education system’s inculcation of vocational identities creates feelings of anomie when placed into the context of labor flexibility and mass unemployment. “Housing class, homeownership, and future inequalities” shows how the seemingly mundane sentiments around homeownership as ontological and material security were built in the Yugoslav era of social housing and its 1990s mass privatization, which resulted in the phenomenon of “super homeownership” (Mandič 2010) that has become the core source of inequality in the country today. The chapter “What children? Family formation and the ‘white plague’” argues that the delays in reproduction among Serbia’s young adults are not a turn towards self-fulfillment and individualization (Giddens 1991), but rooted in the anxieties around meeting the Yugoslav ideology of the “happy child” (Erdei 2013) and 1990s rise of parenthood as “sacrifice” under the context of extreme deprivation (Tomanović 2016). Finally, “Uređena zemlja: affective and (in)effective states” considers how the Yugoslav project of the “withering of the state” was turned on its head in the capitalist transition, illuminating why Serbians seek so much of their state as the “Great Organizer” (Spasić & Birešev 2012), while centering their capacity for moral citizenship in “organized countries.” In all of these instances, Yugoslav histories of the “normal life” continue to mark aspirations and desire, despite Yugoslavia often no longer being named as its referent.

Yet we must also be careful in *where* we recognize the “capacity to aspire” for the ‘good life’ and the pitfall of when it can become “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011). Berlant describes cruel optimism as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic” (2011:32). When an ethos of hope is deeply intertwined in market logics, unfulfilled promises can result in the objects of desire becoming the means of one’s oppression through their loss and ensuing affective destruction (Schwenkel 2013). In this sense, cruel optimism can take the form of, for example, continuing on in processes of educational credentialism (and the specialized labor participation it promises) as a form of class cultivation, only to find oneself as unemployed or unemployable as everyone else (Zipin et al. 2015). This realization, Berlant would say, would leave the person *doubly* devastated, injured not only by their material situation, but by the attachment to the identity formed through this process and the failure to achieve its anticipated outcome.

My dissertation project addresses a discursive field shuttling between *capacities to aspire* (Appadurai 2013) and *cruel optimism* (Berlant 2011), in attempting to understand the facets of the “good life” (or “normal life,” as it is called in the Balkans) and the mourning recognition of its perishing existence in Serbia, expressed through a ubiquitous discourse around emigration or “exit.” Whether we read these emigratory desires and expectations of a normal life as a collectively empowering “capacity to aspire” or a “cruel optimism” depends on where they are projected. I argue that the rejection of the possibility of a “normal life” in Serbia is precisely a rejection of “cruel optimism,” while the feeling of being deserving of it marks a “capacity to aspire”; in this domestically-oriented rejection, the discourse of the “blocked future” shields people from the individualized blame inculcated under late modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) by pointing to broader state-level structures as barriers to achieving “normality.” However, we may understand these *transpositions* of the capacity to live “normally” abroad – to have a job, a house, the ability to raise children, and be governed by an “orderly state” (as the structure of the forthcoming chapters align with each topic) – as itself a form of cruel optimism transposed to a new geographic space “with a future.”

In other words, cruel optimism can also characterize aspirations to emigrate. People can attach themselves to the idea of foreign countries being real “normal countries” which provide structured paths to advancement or economic stability, only to find their life equally or sometimes *more* precarious than it was in their country of origin. The pressures to “succeed” in such imagined “normal countries” pushes would-be emigrants and those who have already left to uphold the image of international *possibility*, lest they be marked as morally and personally incompetent. Thus, in its ideal form, the achieved normal life abroad can truly entail economic stability and even prosperity, while emigration in its many “worse” realities can mean struggling with low wages, visa regimes, being “stuck” waiting for the much-sought-after “Western papers,” or finding oneself “neither here nor there” in embracing a myth of return while laboring towards domestic home ownership.

However, in perhaps my own enactment of “cruel optimism,” I would argue the feeling of *entitlement* to the ‘good life’ as a basic core component of simply being alive is precisely the starting point to a “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013) which is so deeply needed in an era when governments and sweeping ideologies of individualism tell us constantly that we are entitled to nothing at all. While Serbians briefly flirted with an optimism towards individualization, both as an enthusiasm towards risk and self-fulfillment (Mojčić 2012), the felt necessity for basic social rights has returned to a realization that individual self-fulfillment must to be undergirded by the re-embedding of the market (in the Polanyian sense). Despite the ongoing political incoherency of how to *achieve* that good life, holding on to its idea rather than throwing it into the nostalgic dustbin of a bygone era seems vital more than ever.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DISENCHANTMENT

Any dissertation work on the Balkans requires a brief introduction for those less familiar with the intricate histories of South-Eastern Europe. Likewise, before we can assess the dynamics of how “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) and the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013) works for people growing up into the anomic situation of “the blocked future,” we

need to understand the context of *where* they are growing up. I will focus here primarily on the transformations of the last three decades. From the end of World War II to the early 1990s, Serbia was a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Fulfilling narratives of exceptionalism and ambiguity which circulate in Balkanist discourses (Bakić-Hayden & Hayden 1992; Todorova 1994, 1997), Yugoslavia was quite exceptional as a European socialist country. A founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, it was neither part of the socialist Soviet bloc, nor capitalist Western Europe, and much of its state-making was built on upholding its “third way” socialism (Woodward 1995) as separate from these two major global powers. As part of this state-making, Yugoslavia participated in a somewhat decentralized form of governance through workers’ self-management (as opposed to nationalized firms), which created a more diffuse bureaucratic apparatus than seen in its Soviet counterparts, as well as more liberal market practices. The details of this system and how they affect the various parts of this dissertation – such as perspectives on housing, work, education, reproduction, and perceptions of the state – are further explored in the forthcoming chapters. Much of today’s literature on the former Yugoslavia deals with nostalgia (Palmberger 2008; Jansen 2015; Čaušević 2019; Lindstrom 2005), often showing how the socialist era continues to discursively frame ideas of a “normal life” (Kurtovic 2012; Jansen 2015) despite the many very real problems and inequalities of the Yugoslav project, including unequal distribution of social goods (Archer 2016) and high unemployment (Woodward 1995), especially during the 1980s.

In the 1990s, the Yugoslav Wars and the country’s dissolution led to the quick formation of what are now Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. In 1992, Serbia and Montenegro became the “Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” and with Serbia’s ongoing wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo over the course of the 1990s, Serbia’s population faced international sanctions, hyperinflation, and NATO bombings while living under the authoritarian Milošević regime. On October 5th, 2000, Slobodan Milošević was ousted from the government and forced to concede defeat in a democratic election after days of mass protests across the country. This moment was thought to be Serbia’s definitive step towards joining the post-socialist European sphere in the mass “transition” towards Europeanization and liberal democracy (often defined by the

end-goal of membership in the European Union) after a prolonged “blocked transformation” (Bobić 2014; Mojić 2016; Mojić & Petrović 2013). With it were *supposed* to come the displacement of the “nomenklatura” (Horvat and Štiks 2012), political and civic citizenship (Štiks 2015), alongside liberal democratic-inspired “meritocratic” pathways to advancement for young people (Mojić 2012).

However, the first decade of the 21st century was largely marked by disappointment in this transformation. While the first two years seemed quite hopeful (Mojić 2012), the 2003 assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (Democratic Party, liberal reformist) continues to serve as a signifier of Serbia’s end to a brief flirtation with “normal democratic politics.” Thus, although the commemoration and funeral of Đinđić were mobilized as a way to demarcate “a heteronormative, democratic masculinity that evoked a new relationship between family, citizen, state, and nation” in the new government in contrast to his assassins as representatives of the old Milošević social order as “part of a clan structure based on nonreproductive homosocial connections and organized in military and criminal associations that implicitly evoked a contrasting and undemocratic form of masculinity” (Greenberg 2006: 128), the series of political disappointments the country faced in the aftermath show that this “democratic masculinity” has not been brought into fruition. What is often forgotten with the memories of the assassination of “Serbia’s Kennedy” (ibid.) is that some of the most intensive deregulation and privatization which would come to reconfigure life today began under the Đinđić government (as pointed out to me by an interlocutor who said, “had he stayed alive, we would be just as disenchanting with him too”).

The 2000 to 2002 period culminated into one of the largest waves of privatization of public firms in the country in 2003, resulting in massive job loss to state workers in both production and management sectors with little profit to the state budget (Vujačić & Petrović-Vujačić 2016). Many businesses were sold to investors whose goal was not to privatize the firms in order to increase production, but to asset strip them. As Vujačić & Petrović-Vujačić explain, “What compounded this problem in the auctions was the fact that shares in the privatized enterprises could be used as collateral for obtaining credit. This enabled individuals to create Ponzi schemes within privatization, in which one firm, bought

on delayed payment in six-year instalments, could be used as collateral to obtain credit for purchasing the next firm scheduled for privatization. Further purchases of firms would follow, paying off the debt taken on for previously purchased firms through asset stripping and tunnelling of funds” (2016:68). Essentially, privatization in many cases became a money-laundering and capital-extraction scheme which assisted in creating a small and powerful elite in Serbia at the expense of state workers. In future waves of privatization, this would create a suspicion of local investors, who became known as ‘tycoons’ (ibid.), and thus preference brownfield foreign direct investment through rewards such as 2,000 to 10,000 euros for each newly hired employee. These new employees were often hired at minimum wages – meaning, investors would frequently gain more in state subsidies per worker than the amount they actually paid the workers over the course of two or three years (Petrović 2016). However, even the “legitimate” privatizations were not favorable towards workers. While Yugoslav citizens were constitutionally protected against being made “redundant” (Cucić 1987), Serbians since the 2000s have no such rights. Thus, as multiple interlocutors explained to me, their families were laid off from their factories in the privatization processes of the 2000s and 2010s, in order for the new owners to bring in their “own cadres” or cheaper labor.

In the remaining public sector, Serbia faced ongoing austerity measures as a result of IMF pressures to shrink the state budget, which governments ideologically capitalized on by mobilizing long-standing anti-bureaucratic sentiments in the country (Mikuš 2016). This resulted in public sector wage cuts and hiring freezes (including not just of bureaucratic workers, but workers in the remaining public firms, sanitation, healthcare, educators from elementary to tertiary institutions, and more). In the growing private sector, workers saw a deregulation of labor rights and the rise of temporary and contract labor (described below). The period overall is marked by “jobless growth” (Popović 2013), meaning that although employment fell across time, GDP rose due to sharp increases in productivity (often achieved through longer hours and automation, or in the case of privatized Yugoslav firms, formal layoffs of the “hidden unemployed” prevalent in the 80s and 90s). This growth benefited some segments of the middle class disproportionately, but the largest benefits came to investors and business owners. Whether recognized as genuine adherences to EU

stipulations of liberalization or simply a means for a small yet hidden wealthy elite to profit from the process, neoliberal “shock” treatments continued throughout the 2000s and 2010s (ibid.). Within the broader context of insecurity and scarce resources, social and political ties (*veze*) became more important to navigate the social landscape (Brković 2017), and thus possible frames of individual action and bureaucratic navigation in the Balkans became more deeply intertwined through *who one knows* (or can claim to know).

As these “shock” treatments devastated Serbia’s already fragile economy, it did not seem to matter *who* was in power. Despite the seemingly broad and growing spectrum of political ideologies available, every new party seemed to have the same cycle of old politicians, including those active in the 1990s. The 2004 post-Đinđić political sphere was filled by Vojislav Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia (right-wing, national conservative) and the Serbian Radical Party (far-right, nationalist, led by Vojislav Šešelj, tried in the Hague for war crimes) (Subotić 2010), under whom privatizations peaked again in 2007. In 2008, the Democratic Party returned to power in the Parliament under a coalition (having held the presidency since 2004 with President Boris Tadić), but without a majority was forced to re-invite the Socialist Party of Serbia (once Milošević’s party) into the government (ibid.). During this period, the Global Financial Crisis hit the country, and austerity measures, again, continued. In the meantime, pro-European members of the Serbian Radical Party split to form the Serbian Progressive Party³ (SNS: *Srpska napredna stranka*) under Tomislav Nikolić, who would become the Serbian President in 2012. In the same year, the SNS likewise won a majority in Parliament through the “Let’s Get Serbia Moving” coalition with New Serbia (monarchist), Strength of Serbia Movement (liberal conservatism, pro-European), and the Movement of Socialists (left wing populist, nationalist party who split from Socialist Party of Serbia, strangely enough, as an anti-European faction). The Prime Minister became SNS’s Aleksandar Vučić, who stayed in the position until 2017, at which point he was elected president (and expanded the powers of the presidency in turn). Since 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party has held the Presidency and the Prime Minister positions, with Aleksandar Vučić as its primary

³ At the time of the split, the Serbian Radical Party was the single largest party in the country. All others were in government under coalitions.

figurehead. Under the SNS, austerity measures have continued (again, partly under the guidance of the IMF), including pension cuts, the retraction of the public sector and wage cuts, hiring freezes, and more.

To summarize briefly, the majority of these political figures have at some point been a part of another party and switched or formed a new party. As an example, Vučić served as the Minister of Information from 1998-2000 under Milošević's regime, fining journalists who criticized the government. As a part of the Serbian Radical Party in the 1990s, he was key in supporting Serbian nationalism and the ideology of creating a "Greater Serbia." In splitting with the Serbian Radical Party after the 2008 election of the Democratic Party, he became a pro-European candidate, and thus radically shifted his ideological orientation. Today, the SNS appears to be entrenched within the government, with few viable opposition candidates. Considering the "more of the same" atmosphere of the political sphere over the last two decades, however, it is easy to understand why Serbians have very little trust in politicians and why they do not seem to think it matters who is in power (Spasić & Birešev 2012; Tomanović & Stanojević 2015). It is also then somewhat unsurprising that in the 2017 presidential election, the third most popular candidate was a satirical politician named Ljubiša "Beli" Preletačević ("Preletačević" meaning "defector-ević" or "turncoat-ević," poking fun at Serbian politicians' tendencies to constantly switch parties and ideologies to suit their interests), who rode through the streets on a white horse and promised to build Serbia a coastline, "offer three times as much as the other candidates," and "lie to the people, and prioritize [his] own interests."

Under this context of uncertainty and precarity, the future circulates as a powerful commodity. Private enterprise capitalizes on the future, with construction companies claiming to "build our future," while massive advertisements across Belgrade for the Gazprom (Russia) and NIS (Serbia) oil and gas partnership proclaim it a "partnership for the future." Like the broader population, Serbian politicians' campaigns are obsessed with the future. The future functions as a way to promise a better tomorrow, despite the less-than-ideal today. In his campaigns, Boris Tadić used the slogans "For a secure future" and "The future, IMMEDIATELY!" Aleksandar Vučić's campaign likewise used "Choose the future!" and now uses "The future of Serbia." These are, of course, strategized slogans

coming from extensive market research, and so we might be able to say that the future “sells” in Serbia, even if not everyone is buying it. “Beli,” in his parody campaign, likewise used “Strongly into the future!” as one of his advertisements to poke fun at the claims to the future politicians aspire to.

However, as Jens Beckert (2019) has recently argued, neoliberalism⁴ is suffering from a depletion of “promissory legitimacy,” or loss of the population’s faith that the future-oriented promises it makes claim to – such as economic prosperity – can be accomplished. While early on the transition from state socialism to liberal democracy was fueled by the promises of “rejoining Europe” and “catching up with Europe” through joining the EU’s biblical “land of plenty” (Petrović 2014; Horvat and Štiks 2012; Subotić 2010), the project of “transition” has proven to bring anything but economic stability and security (Abbott et al. 2010). Horvat and Štiks (2012) argue that the endless “wandering in the desert” of “transition” should no longer be called a transition at all. In insisting on the continued use of the rhetoric of “transition” and “incompleteness,” they point to the fact that, “It is as if no one dares to say that Transition meant precisely bringing these states under the sway of capitalism. In this respect, the Transition as such is long over. There is nothing to ‘transit’ to anymore.” (2012:39)

Another eight years after the publication of Horvat and Štiks’s book, we can say that not much has changed on the long route to the “land of plenty,” apart from possibly a global turn towards populist politics, as seen prominently in the United States under Trump, Hungary under Orban, Turkey under Erdogan, as well as across the post-Yugoslav Balkans. These populisms are heralded by the loss of promissory legitimacy of neoliberal policies and a broad yet politically incoherent desire for “something else” (Beckert 2019).

What the promise of Europeanization in the 1990s and 2000s failed to foresee in the processes of EU accession and concurrent adherence to liberalization is the discrepancy of what forms of citizenship are offered between liberal democracy and socialism. To explain

⁴ Neoliberalism here connotes the broad economic and social policies of liberalization (deregulation and the lifting of restrictions on private enterprise), privatization (privatizing public industries and property), marketization (operation of public goods under market logics), and austerity (retraction of the welfare state and public spending).

this, Marshall's ([1950] 2006) normative argument (Lister 2005) on citizenship is relevant. Marshall divides citizenship into three elements: political, civil, and social. Political citizenship typically entails the capacity of citizens to participate in the exercise of power, such as serving in elected government positions. Civil citizenship is "composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice" (Marshall 2006:30) – we can see this important element prominently in the mainstream US civil rights movement as well as within contemporary legal scholarship, as a right to participate in society on equal *legal* footing, be recognized as legible by the state, and entitled to its protection. Social citizenship, most discussed in comparative welfare studies (Lister 2005, 2017), includes "the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share in the full social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards of society" (Marshall 2006: 30). Depending on the context, social citizenship is thought to be guaranteed through access to education, healthcare, regulated labor, and so on. Although political and civil citizenship are (at least nominally) to be guaranteed in the framework of liberal democracy, social citizenship has largely been understood as, at worst, a form of inappropriate dependence on the state that encourages laziness, and at best, a nostalgic bygone status which marked the Keynesian era in Western industrialized nations but disappeared with the rise of neoliberalism and the ethos of self-reliance.

From such a liberal democratic perspective which centralizes political and civil citizenship, it seems reasonable that citizens of socialist countries were not seen as being "citizens" at all by Western observers (Štiks 2015). However, while socialist states fared poorly in providing political and civic citizenship⁵, socialist ideas of citizenship were heavily oriented around upholding social rights (ibid). "Among other rights, socialist rights guaranteed full employment, a publicly funded education and health system, housing rights and, in Yugoslavia, workers' self-management as social ownership and workplace

⁵ Although this too is debatable, especially in terms of civil citizenship, considering that socialist countries did, in fact, have well-documented courts of law and judicial processes (cf. Hayden 1986) as well as delegated representation through workers' assemblies (Štiks 2015). Though we can debate on how equal and just these processes were, the same critique can of course be turned to non-socialist countries.

democracy coupled with the elaborated delegate system of representation in the political sphere” (Štiks 2015:15).

While the secessionist revolutions in the former Yugoslav states aimed towards becoming Western liberal democracies undergirded by rights to civil and political citizenship, often under the frame of ethnic self-determination fueled by nationalist sentiments, many “ordinary people” took for granted that state-organized social citizenship (or socialist citizenship, in Štiks’s terms) would remain (Stambolieva 2015, 2016). The importance of this bygone social citizenship has been underscored in the last two decades, as Serbians found themselves with “new” political rights, able to elect representatives regardless of party membership, yet perpetually plagued with what appeared to be the same politicians jumping to new parties. Likewise, they found their civil rights, to “individual freedom,” the right to own property, and “justice,” to be largely meaningless for the majority of those who own very little and who have been stripped of their social rights to permanent employment, housing, and the moderate peace that the “normal life” of bare social security (Jansen 2015; Kurtovic 2012) provided. With the “road to Europe” and “transition” becoming a seemingly endless process, political disappointment alongside mass impoverishment seems to have become the new normal, while the search for the once-socialist “normal life”⁶ has been displaced to (often north or central) Western Europe. In the case of Allison (2013), writing in a seemingly completely different context of Japan, she finds a strikingly similar disposition of futurelessness among her interlocutors to those I find in Serbia – of hope after conflict, and despair after new “blockings.” Likewise

⁶ In discussing this “normal life” rooted in the Yugoslav period, I do not mean to idealize Yugoslavia or say that it did not have inequalities, or that everyone had access to these rights to “normality” in the same way. As Archer, Duda and Stubbs’ (2016) collection “Social Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism” points out, Yugoslav socialism was laden with class inequalities and unequal distributions of social goods. My core point in outlining Yugoslav aspects of the “normal life,” however, is to explain why my interlocutors feel entitled to more from the state than, say, Americans (Hochschild 2016), and likewise why they see the state as so important in managing access to these material resources, as will be discussed in the upcoming chapters and culminate in Chapter 4.

However, I *would* argue that from a left or radical political organizing perspective, having these rights named within the constitution and a legal framework to uphold them is a better starting point than not having them at all. This is why we can see that often the most prominent social movements in the Yugoslav period were those which demanded *more socialism* and a “better socialism” than the one which was present through the rising inequality between the “red bourgeoisie” of elite party members and ordinary people, in contrast to the ones today, which largely attempt to maintain what people already have (or had) rather than orienting themselves towards possible utopias.

centering this disposition of futurelessness in the loss of social citizenship, she notes that, “when social citizenship or horizons of expectation are blocked, hopelessness sets in.” (Allison 2013:62)

From this historical framework and a theoretical understanding of futures as geographically distributed (Appadurai 2013), Serbia’s widespread emigration aspirations begin to make sense. Within the framework of Hirschman’s exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman 1970; Woolfson 2010), some of this enacted migration operates as an “exit” after political attempts at “voice” to shift the direction of the politics and policies of the country have failed. Backing these intents and existing emigration is a public discourse around migration which permeates broader Serbian society. As noted above – migration discourses are not simply ways of describing the intended migration or the receiving country, but often form a register of describing the country one is planning on emigrating *from* (Johnson 2019a). Emigration thus operates as a rhetorical solution to critiques of the state and society after “voice” has proven ineffective, under the broader scope of a discourse of the “blocked future.” Migration is not only enacted as a response to broad political and social disappointment, but discourses of migration can often function as a form of “voice” (Hirschman 1970) within the “sending country.” One such protest sign epitomizes this form of “exit as voice” in a plea to “unblock” Serbia’s political future:

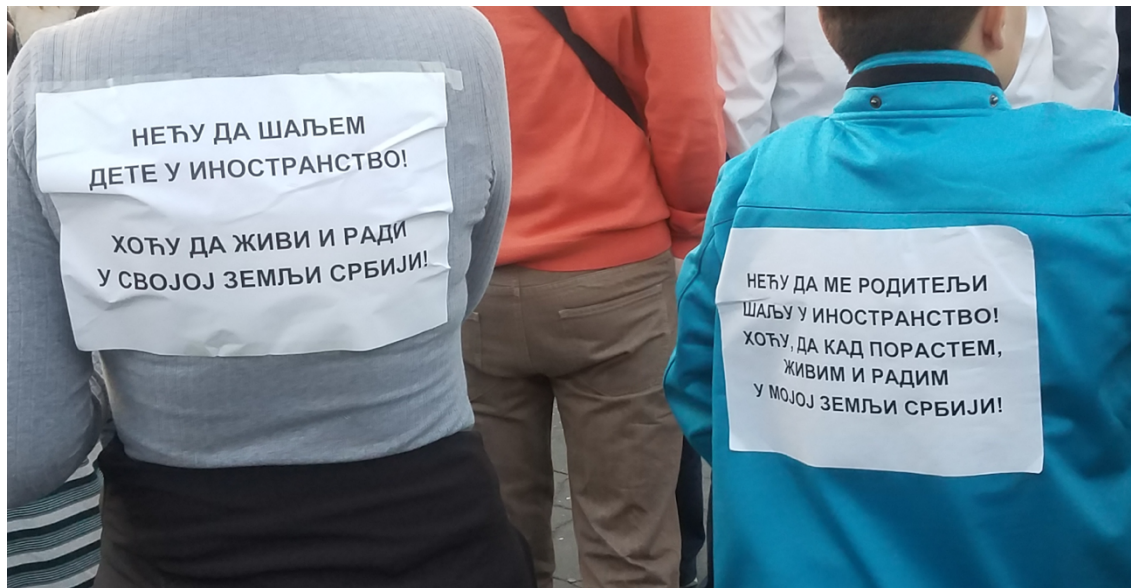


Figure 1. 10 April 2017, photo by Tanja Anđić

The sign on the woman's back reads, "I don't want to send my child abroad! I want him to live and work in his country, Serbia!" while the child's reads, "I don't want my parents to send me abroad! I want to, when I grow up, live and work in my country, Serbia!" Although I do not know exactly the authorial intent behind the signs from the perspective of the pair, we can analyze what it signifies to the viewer in the context (Barthes [1968] 2001) of the anti-government "Protest Against the Dictatorship" in 2017. The aspect of "living and working" incites the child as a future worker in Serbia, much needed in the context of depopulation (discussed in Chapter 3). However, his future work is conditional on national change. "Abroad," or foreign countries (*inostranstvo*), provide the alternative (at this moment, *better*) space for him to live if nothing changes. Thus, a sign like this is legible as "voice" through the potential of "exit." As a ubiquitous collective call to emigrate to describe state-level and societal disappointment, seen in news commentaries, bus conversations, and public performances, "exit discourse" functions as a form of "voice" of critique, while the existing emigration functions as a perpetual signifier of this disappointment and ongoing perception of domestic "futurelessness."

IMAGINED FUTURES BETWEEN TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD AND TRANSITIONS TO CAPITALISM

While we are often left to speculate and transpose our own ideas of what a "good life" is into the theoretical frameworks of uncertainty above, the good life or "normal life" are ultimately normative life course frameworks when we pull them from the sphere of public sentiments and collective protest, and understand their individual implications on life trajectories. Thus, life course scholars, specifically those who study "transitions to adulthood," tell us much more explicitly about what the "good life" used to mean in both the Keynesian "West" and the state-socialist "East," and how this process towards it has changed.

During the modern period, young people could largely expect to meet markers of "adulthood" in a relatively patterned trajectory of completing education, transitioning into

the workforce, moving out of their parental household, and eventually family formation – these being the broad aspects of a “normal life” or normative life course. Today’s young people are experiencing what have variously been called “yo-yo,” “de-standardized” or “fragmented” transitions (EGRIS 2001) characterized by phenomena such as returning to the parental household after job loss, entering higher education after or alongside work, having children before meeting other markers, or perhaps never having children at all. At their core, transitions to adulthood are shaped by state-level institutions and how they constrain and enable certain trajectories (Walther 2006), and thus we see different life courses taking form under different state-institutional contexts (see Chapter 1 for an overview in the European sphere). In most contemporary work, this destandardization is understood as an effect of the deregulation of labor markets and economies, the withdrawal of the welfare state – the core aspects of what used to undergird social citizenship – and the resulting increased precarity of young people attempting to establish independence. In Serbia, we can say that these transitions are not necessarily “yo-yo” transitions but instead “protracted” or “prolonged”: young people still largely follow a standardized trajectory, but over a much longer period of time than for previous generations (Tomanović 2016; Lavrič, Tomanović & Jusić 2019). This means, finishing school at a later age, entering the workforce at a later age (often combined with long periods of unemployment), moving out of the parental household in one’s late 20s or early 30s (rather than their mid-20s), and putting off marriage and family formation – sometimes indefinitely.

Across this work, adulthood is recognized as a social construct, like all identity categories, and thus is shaped by context and culture. As such, we can consider adulthood in many ways in industrialized societies: adulthood is often “formally” achieved at the age of 18 according to states, when people become “of age” (*punoletni*); it can also be discussed as a “grown-up” (*odrasla osoba*) which is a very vague category in both English and Serbian; or it can be marked by “independence” (*samostalnost*), typically meaning one who can operate largely independently in an economic sense outside of their family of birth. In Serbia, the most salient category to discuss adulthood seems to be “independence” (*samostalnost*), though of course “not being independent” does not make one not an adult. Thus, we may consider this dissertation more a discussion about “transitions to

independence” than “transitions to adulthood,” though even independence is a contextually-laden category. This is especially so as Serbia has become a “hybrid-regime” (Mojčić 2016) welfare state, in transitioning from universal social provisions towards a “familistic” (Tomanović & Stanojević 2015) or “sub-protective” (Buchmann & Kriesi 2011) model of the state. This means, under low social welfare support, high levels of unemployment, and constrained labor markets, family has become the primary safety net of young Serbians (Milić & Zhou 2018; Tomanović & Stanojević 2015). Those whose families were the “victims of the transition” – left without work and owned housing – or whose families have passed away, suffer most under this model.

How young people *process* destandardization and its destabilizing consequences is a key interest of my dissertation. The primary theoretical framework and center of the destandardization debate in youth studies literatures has used Beck (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens’s (1991) concept of the emergent reflexive biography or “choice biography” as a foil (Woodman 2009; Abbott et al. 2010; Silva 2012). Though varied in its usage and much debated in its implications, the choice biography (also called the ‘elective biography,’ ‘reflexive biography,’ ‘do-it-yourself biography’ or ‘risk biography’) can be summarized as a form of subjectivity/biographical self which emerged under late modernity (Giddens 1991) or liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). Late modernity brought about “institutionalized individualism” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), meaning a turn of institutional structures such as welfare and employment regimes from acting on the collective towards the individual, and the destandardization and individualization of the “normal biography” as organized through these once collectively-aimed institutions. Of subjects, it requires constant action, planning, decision-making, and calculation of risk towards imagined futures (whether in the form of job changes or investments or the rise of insurance as a mitigator of risk). For some, this has meant a newfound “freedom” in the destabilization of once-rigid social forms such as class, gender, and family (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002:2), alongside the rise of wealth for those who “planned correctly” through a vocational choice or financial investment made at just the right moment. For many others it has meant dispossession and dislocation.

While critics of Beck's framework have argued that he is inattentive to inequality and dismissive of class, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim are quite attentive to the inequality of this new form of biography of "choosing," noting that this biography is "always a 'risk biography', indeed a 'tightrope biography', a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" (2002:3), where the "wrong choices" or misfortune are seen not structurally, but as mere bad luck.

Beck & Beck-Gernsheim likewise are not *dismissing* class, but noting that the rise of risk as an organizing facet of society has made "poverty and unemployment correspond less and less to class stereotypes, [and so] it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify them and to organize a strong political movement around them" (ibid.:47-48), all the while people are increasingly forced to claim "individual responsibility and blame for – and often cope alone with – what used to be handled collectively as a class destiny" (ibid.). This is especially injurious in heavily work-oriented post-socialist spheres:

'People are no longer human, the loss of face is indescribable': this is how an unemployed East German expresses in words the wretchedness of his present existence. In the new lands of the Federal Republic, the spectre of unemployment *now has a majority of people directly or indirectly in its grip*. The equation of losing a job with 'losing face' applies there in an even deeper sense, for the GDR was most emphatically a 'work society', where people were integrated into the community via the workplace (often even after they had retired from it). (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002:48, my emphasis)

The persistent identification with vocational callings makes this "loss of face" apply similarly among young Serbians, even those who are still in high school. In facing "biographical uncertainty" (Reiter 2010) between desires for a standardized life trajectory and a future rhetorically marked by risk and precarity, the pitfalls of the institutionalization of individualization and biographical risk ring very true in the Serbian post-socialist context. Bourdieu, often used as the "counterpart" to Beck in debates about individualization versus class reproduction, speaks of this new era in an outstandingly similar tone of a cross-class precaritization:

It has emerged clearly that job insecurity is now everywhere: in the private sector but also in the public sector, which has greatly increased the number of temporary, part-time or casual positions; in industry, but also in the institutions of cultural production and diffusion – education, journalism, the media, etc. In all these areas it produces more or less identical effects, which become particularly visible in the extreme case of the unemployed: the destructuring of existence, which is deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space. ... by making the whole future uncertain, [casualization] prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable. (Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: against the tyranny of the market*, 1998:82)

As Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) elaborate, while some people are faced with an increasing array of anxiety-inducing *choices*, others face the uncertain future with a deep anxiety about *not having choices at all* (see also, Appadurai 2013; Walther 2006). I underline this sense of agentic yet risky choice and constraining choicelessness as it marks the entirety of this dissertation. As I discuss in Chapter 1, Serbian high school students do not respond to this “choice biography,” even in its idealized discursive form of “planning how to achieve one’s dreams” with enthusiasm towards risk-taking and the prospects of self-discovery, as, for example, Mojić (2012) found in the *early* transitional period in Serbia, or others have found in more privileged contexts (Leccardi 2012; Heggli, Haukanes & Tjomsland 2013). Instead, they show anomic forms of withdrawal, or projections of “real choice” to imagined international destinations. As Leccardi (2005) notes, this uncertainty, alongside hindering the capacity to articulate a future for oneself, can also mean the dwindling of meaning given to action taken in the *present*. In a desire to maintain biographical certainty, or a coherent sense of self against the incoherency of the world they see around them, my interlocutors centralize home ownership as a physical and biographical grounding, as discussed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, they likewise point to this sense of tightrope risk as a response to the country’s recent pronatalist laws, while in Chapter 4 they center the state as a mediator of agency and thus moral capacity.

However, while one might not have “real choices,” they can still have aspirations. Framed within contexts of uncertainty, lack of choice, and the transition to adulthood, I engage with an insightful literature on imaginations of the future and migration aspirations among young people (Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016; Erdei 2010; Horváth 2008; Horváth & Nováky 2016; Mojić 2012; Mojić & Petrović 2013; Van Mol 2016; Strielkowski & Bilan 2016). Migration literatures have followed suit in a semantic turn towards concepts such as “aspirations,” “desire,” “hope,” “risk,” and “waiting,” (Carling & Collins 2018), as a burgeoning literature on *pre*-migration and an attention to perceptions of temporal orderings. As noted in the first part of this introduction, these affective aspects of emigration aspirations and imagined futures as spaces of agency (Mandich 2018; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016), hope (Brun 2015; Kleist & Jansen 2016), understandings of one’s own biography as constrained or relaxed by broader structures (Heggli et al. 2013), and are precisely where I situate my own work. I especially side with Mandich (2018) in understanding aspirations for “ordinary” things as a potential facet of the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013), while working to understand the local peculiarity of what “ordinary” means and how it came to be.

Though the empirical research above is often conducted in contexts much different from Serbia, this broad destandardization and reforming of subjectivity is quite pertinent to the Serbian context. As socialism broadly “fell” around 1989, postsocialist contexts have been sort of “laboratory” for understanding the stark differences produced in the shift from the collectively standardized “solid modernity” to the institutionally individualized and destandardized “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) and its effects on individuals. In the post-Yugoslav context, these works have documented well the persistent desire for a “normal life” and “normal time,” often as a referent to a Yugoslav past (Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2014, 2015; Kurtovic 2012) or increasingly as framed through international travel experiences (Johnson 2019a). Johnson (2019b) shows how Serbia’s post-2009 visa regime change with the EU shifted the discourse of youth migration in Serbia from ‘escaping entrapment’ (Erdei 2010; Jansen 2009; Greenberg 2011) to more nuanced position-taking, couched in short trips abroad. In this sense, we can see how imaginations of life abroad from the East European context have changed from idealizing an imagined “West” as a

place of escape to thinking of it as a space of possibility shaped by experience. Others have shown how this perceived contemporary “abnormality” (Greenberg 2011) shapes whether, when, and how people see themselves as “moral” actors (Rajković 2017; Kojanić 2017), or at times as “*demoralized*” workers (Rajković 2018) against a broad academic trend in framing precarity and “stuckedness” in celebratory terms of moral striving, or what Rajković calls the “virtue of precarity” (ibid.). Of the broad sphere of recent and exciting (often, but not always, anthropological) works on everyday life and the politics of the everyday in the Balkans (cf. Kurtovic 2012; Brković 2017; Čelebičić 2013; Jansen 2015; Greenberg 2014; Johnson 2019a; Rajković 2018; Mikuš 2016; Kojanić 2017; Tomanović 2010; Tomanović & Stanojević 2015; Tomanović, Stanojević & Ljubičić 2016); Erdei 2010; Cvetičanin & Birešev 2012), my ethnographic findings often reflect theirs, and at times, reading their ethnographic vignettes and quotes of interlocutors, I wondered whether I was reading my own data. In this repetition⁷, I hope that I have broadened the scope of the post-Yugoslav “puzzle” and added some of my own contributions. As their writings and insights flow throughout this dissertation to shape my own analysis, I will not spend too much time on them here.

METHODS

When I first embarked on this project, having read a multitude of works on the “ethos of the self” emerging or manufactured in Western settings under neoliberalism (cf. Demerath 2009; Van Oort 2015; Dilts 2011; Korteweg 2003), whether understood as the makings of a “choice biography” (Woodman 2009) or the inculcation of a subjectivity of *homo economicus* (Dilts 2011), I wondered whether and how this ethos took shape in post-socialist settings. Knowing that most Serbian youth were considering emigrating abroad

⁷ In the case of Dana Johnson’s dissertation research (2019b), we actually did witness some of the same ethnographic moments, as we both embarked on our projects in a similar time period with similar questions, at first unbeknownst to each other. I hope that our different points of foci and lines of inquiry serve as a testament to the need for the varied positions of social scientists broadly, and ethnographers specifically, from both how we approach the field, to how we analyze it. I hope that our works are, in their unintentional similarity, complementary to each other and build on the bigger picture of migration aspirations in Serbia.

(Mojic 2012), I questioned how young people, their families, and schools, were shaping their individual biographies towards a “transition to adulthood” in anticipation of future work in a globalized labor market aimed towards this imagined “West.” To answer these questions, I began the project with a year of participant observation in an “average” secondary school in Belgrade, during the 2015-2016 school year (these methods are outlined in Chapter 1). As detailed in Chapter 1, what I found was quite different from what I expected: instead of young people working fervently at developing flexible skills under the tutelage of their teachers, I saw a school which continued to inculcate identities bound by a calling, while youth saw themselves as slowly careening towards a labor market with no jobs in their vocation. I saw a rejection of the “choice biography” when students were asked to imagine the careers they *desire* and how to work towards them – that is, a rejection of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) marked by continued efforts to achieve or reproduce semblances of normative life markers which may never be come to be. With that came a displacement of the ideal of meritocracy to imagined places abroad, and in its stead emerged a framework of “luck” and “chance” in the local context, of young people seeing their domestic futures as shaped by who they know, and being in the right place, at the right time, as the right opportunity opened up.

In my day to day life in Serbia during that year, I felt knocked back by constant explanations of how *terrible* everything is, from suspicions about the contents of bread, to whether the quality of medicines were the same as in the West, to what kind of “democracy” people live in. It contrasted starkly with the public appearance of central Belgrade, with its bustling night life, cosmopolitan boutiques and restaurants, and fancy cafes whose patios were often full. At the same time, these streets were filled with advertisements of schools promising routes to work abroad and language classes which would prepare one to undertake university education in Europe. The ubiquitous discussions and public signs about leaving the country, with personal interactions often couched within my own position as someone who lived in “the West” as a referent, underlined that there is more to the story of Serbia’s migration discourse than a simple desire to work for higher wages. It likewise told me that, while the high schoolers I worked with seemed to “not yet” be transitioning towards independence, and largely aimed to continue on in their educations

while living with and primarily being financially supported by their families, there *were* young people “planning” in the city. When I told my friend who introduced this chapter to us about this seeming general “lack of planning” outside of the standard trajectories set for them by the education system on the part of the high schoolers, he told me, “well, obviously. They’re too young. They’ve never had to work in Serbia.”

After returning to Minneapolis for parts of the 2016-2017 academic year, I indefinitely moved to Belgrade to continue my research in July 2017. My focus turned towards “older” young people, and I engaged my now much broader “field” by participating in everyday life in the city and interviewing adults who entered (or were supposed to enter) the labor force after the 2000 revolution and Serbia’s transition to market democracy. Alongside this year of participant observation in the high school, the dissertation is thus a culmination of over four years of ethnographic discourse analysis (Gowan 2010) in Belgrade. While my initial starting point was supposed to be about how young people locally construct individual futures towards imagined participation in a global economy, my field rapidly changed my focus to how the broad “lack of future” foreseen in Serbia shaped a local discourse around migration aspirations, and what these aspirations told us about contemporary life in the country.

From 2015 to 2020, I attended a variety of public performances dealing with Serbia’s emigration, like plays such as *WTF Are We Doing Here?* and *Coffee & Cigarettes, Tales from Belgrade*, alongside public conversations and panels such as “*Should I Stay or Should I Go?*” which reflect on the extraordinary youth migration happening in the country. I likewise carefully followed local news on out-migration, young people’s employment, politics, and other day to day life, collecting hundreds of articles and thousands of comments from newspapers and tabloids ranging the political spectrum, which were aimed at different “publics” (Warner 2002). Through often lively debates, comment sections in online news in Serbia offered a view into the broader public’s deliberative responses (Rowe 2015; Henrich & Holmes 2013; Mathe & Caldwell 2017) to “official” discourses (presented through news summaries of government officials’ and researchers’ statements) on migration and everyday life.

Informal ethnographic interviews and discussions with my broader social circle likewise heavily shaped my research. Over my time here, I watched many friends and acquaintances leave, and some come back. I was lucky enough to early on make friends with a group of cruise ship, river boat, and other international tourist trade workers in a happenstance of being mistaken at an EKV tribute concert for another “Tanja” in Belgrade who is apparently my doppelganger. Their experiences of work here and abroad helped me to think about the projects of laboring internationally in hopes of “making something for oneself here,” and what sacrifices that entails. My other friends came from various circles, including my family networks which existed before the breakup of Yugoslavia, who have been kind enough to operate as somewhat of my own extended family here, and people I met through my various outings in the city. In my free time, I helped to start a radical “social center” which has become somewhat of a hidden alternative cultural institution in Belgrade. This shaped my life to become less of that of an isolated academic, and more of an organizer of social events and bartender to alternative Belgradians. During smoke breaks between music sets, I was happy to enter conversations about Serbia’s healthcare system, pressures to have children from parents, exchanges of advice on renting in the city, and debates on whether life abroad is “really better.”

While global political spectators have often lamented the seeming lack of “politicization” of Serbia’s populace (Spasić & Birešev 2012; Horvat & Štiks 2012), my time in Belgrade has felt quite political. In 2016, I attended the weekly mass protests of “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” (approximately, “We Won’t Let Belgrade D(r)own”) against the gentrifying forces and shady dealings between the government and international investors behind the Belgrade on the Waterfront development project, which completely transformed the south bank of the Sava river in the city center with the aim of building a “Dubai in Belgrade,” and thus gave rise to a new wave of youth mobilizations. In 2017, I attended again the weekly “Protest protiv diktature” (Protest Against the Dictatorship) which charged the Serbian Progressive Party’s Prime Minister-turned-President Aleksandar Vučić with election fraud and media tampering. Both mass mobilizations, however, eventually petered out; I suspect this is in part due to the partial “officialization” of the protests through the participation of larger political figures from opposition parties which made the movements

seem ready to be captured by political elites, the sometimes lack of where to “go next” with these mobilizations, alongside simple fatigue on the part of protestors who had done their due diligence for weeks on end. At their peak, however, these protests attracted tens of thousands of demonstrators, many of them young people. These mass demonstrations testify that Serbian youth and the larger populace are not “politically apathetic,” but rather disenchanted with the existing political sphere and scope of formal participation available to them.

While my intent in the beginning was not to include an autoethnographic account in the dissertation, my own experiences with bureaucratic offices, landlords, the cultural life of Belgrade, and rides with taxi drivers pepper this dissertation as they, in hindsight (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010), became relevant to the analyses of the field. As such, I “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (ibid.). I take this meaning of autoethnography partly as an “insider ethnography” — in some sense documenting my partial transition to “becoming a partial insider,” including one formal sense of obtaining citizenship in Serbia, and becoming a part of the alternative cultural scene in Belgrade. As my own biography as a 1.5 generation refugee from Sarajevo to the suburbs of Minneapolis is quite different from most people who *grew up* in Serbia, it does not take the autoethnographic method as an exploration of my broad biography as connected to the cultural, social, and political field. However, my own “transition into adulthood” in Serbia surely also influenced my thinking, in that my time here has been marked with key moments of independence such as living on my own far away from family, cohabitation, and navigating rental markets and bureaucracies, while my interaction with the field likewise shaped how I think about my own “adulthood” and aspects of “normality.”

Last, and certainly not least, this dissertation depends on 27 interviews with “young Serbians.” While these interviews feature most heavily in this dissertation, I depend on them more as ways to tell the entire ethnographic tale with the benefit of precision in regard to how language is used to discuss the “blocked future.” As precise wording is vital to discourse analysis, I use the interviews so that neither I nor my readers need to depend on my memory or way of seeing as they would in written fieldnotes of ethnographic

encounters. Thus, we should not think of them as a “representative sample” or even representing each other (as they of course had a variety of viewpoints and life experiences). Instead, I consider their multiple ways of speaking as channels for how the broad discourse about the “blocked future” is elaborated and culminates through different inflections of discontent.

I recruited participants in a variety of ways, including through my own networks, acquaintances of friends, and through more distant channels. Some were friends I have known over the course of my time here, some were distant acquaintances of theirs, while others came from people I met casually who recommended their friends after discussing what I do. I likewise recruited interlocutors through language schools in Belgrade, who allowed me to step into their classrooms and share what I was doing and that my interest was in interviewing people who were broadly considering living abroad. Some interviewees recommended other people they knew who might be able to offer me “another perspective.” Seventeen of my interlocutors were residing in Serbia at the time of interview, while 10 were living abroad. In 2018, I spent a month in Germany interviewing people who had recently moved there. In Germany, three of my interlocutors were friends of friends from Serbia, while the rest came from a call I put onto a Facebook group for people who had recently emigrated from the Balkans. All names presented in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

The people I interviewed may largely be considered “millennials,” give or take a few years in either direction. Among them, some would consider themselves as belonging to what has been colloquially called the “lost generation” (Jelača, Kolanović & Lugarić 2017) of people born in the late 1970s and early 80s who saw Yugoslav socialism as children, experienced their teenage years under the sanctions and war, and entered adulthood under austerity measures and state retraction. Others were born during the war(s), and thus have no frame of reference for Yugoslavia other than what their parents tell them, but nevertheless hold expectations of what “normality” should be in reference to this period, which they, I argue, transpose to lives abroad. Like Kurtovic’s participants, many of my interlocutors — especially those who were teenagers in the 1990s, found themselves “prematurely catapulted in adulthood by their wartime experiences, [and] also unable to

realize their adult independence because of lack of opportunities in the postwar period” (2012:5). What draws them together is that they entered (or were supposed to enter) the labor force after the 2000 revolution, and thus largely experienced – or are still experiencing – their transition to adulthood as precarious and protracted. Their core commonality is that they have either considered living abroad or have already gone abroad. In some sense, then, this dissertation takes place as a conversation between those who are thinking about leaving and those who have already left. Yet their perspectives, as I show in the following pages, are quite similar, providing a feedback loop of affirmation. The Serbians in Serbia imagine life abroad as stable and “organized,” while those abroad attest to this level of “state organization” and “possibility” despite having to struggle through learning a new system and starting from the “bottom up.”

Thus, while global ethnographic work dealing with contemporary precarity reasonably tends to focus analyses around the most marginalized, this project takes the approach of looking at what in youth studies has been called a “missing middle” of “ordinary” young people who are often excluded from such analysis yet likewise face significant economic destabilization (Cairns, Growiec & de Almeida Alves 2014; Mandich 2018; Woodman 2013). The majority of my interviewees described themselves as “lower middle class,” though this definition seemed to occupy a multitude of labor positions and callings, from factory workers, to secondary and tertiary-educated yet endlessly unemployed people, to those in stable specialized state jobs. In the post-Yugoslav context, class does not map as easily onto the frameworks set by academics studying Western contexts. Though most people had a response to their class background, as Ivona told me, “You can’t really think about it the same way here.”⁸ Ivona is a prime example of the difficulty of talking about class today, and the broad “declassing” (Archer 2018) or dislocation from class positions which has happened across Serbian society: as someone who came from a solidly “middle

⁸ Though this does not mean academics have not attempted to understand class and class relations in Serbia, nor that class is completely insignificant. For examples, see Lazić (2015), Petrović (2013), and Archer (2018). As Archer (2018) argues, the precarious workers of the Yugoslav era may have been able to deal with the “makeshift economy” of the 1990s better than their middle class counterparts who were heavily integrated into the state and thus into the middle class “normal life” idealized in the Yugoslav era. Even these declassified workers, however, saw this period as “it was better when it was worse,” since despite poor wages and living conditions, the state or workplaces provided access to essentials such as healthcare or benefits-in-kind (ibid.).

class” background, she attended university but was unable to finish due to family circumstances, found herself unemployed and restricted from the few opportunities offered to her by her hesitation to join a potential employer’s political party, and, as her family has largely passed away, left without the core social safety net which undergirds Serbian society. Like nearly every interlocutor, she experienced downward class mobility (at least in terms of economic stability and material assets) between her parents’ generation and her own. As I argue in Chapter 2, the core emergent class difference between my interlocutors, as described typically in terms of advantage and disadvantage for navigating widespread precarity and the horizon of the future, seemed to be whether or not they were given or set to inherit housing from their families. However, although Ivona inherited an apartment, this does not necessarily translate to a “good life” – for her, like many Serbians, it merely translates to the capacity to survive and a place to come back to in case an emigration attempt does not go as planned.

In Germany, a few interlocutors were people with university degrees who were working as construction workers or hotel receptionists, remaining hopeful that one day they might “work in their field.” While many of my interviewees had participated in some higher education (as many young Serbians seem to have, whether or not they finish⁹), their own family backgrounds ranged from farmers and factory workers, to teachers and librarians, to pharmacists and doctors. However, even across that class scale, many of their parents were “made redundant” in the transition (particularly those who worked for public enterprises) and thus lost their jobs; some were never able to find new ones. In Serbia, all the interviewees suffered from precaritization in different forms. Some are permanently on temporary contracts, or searching for work, while others are less-but-still precarious in that the institutional structures which once supported the “normal life” they aspire to in Serbia are crumbling, and thus they cannot see a long future for themselves. Some experienced seemingly endless unpaid internships or “*prakse*” (i.e. praxis) in their state-oriented vocations before finally searching for work in the private sector “outside of their callings,”

⁹ According to Eurostat (2018a) data, 32.8% of Serbian age 25-34 have *completed* tertiary education, while 56.8 have completed secondary education. As education completion can average well into one’s late 20s (Tomanović & Stanojević 2015) and unfinished degrees are not counted for tertiary education levels, we can assume that many more than the 32.8% of younger Serbians have completed *some* tertiary education.

thus delaying their formal entry into the workforce in anticipation of a vocational position which never appeared. Notably, for those who worked in hospitality, these “prakse” amounted to little more than simply working as waitresses and hotel cleaners for free.

In one sense, the Serbian precariat has much in common with the “Western” precariat, in that precaritization and downward class mobility has seemingly affected workers across class scales (Bourdieu 1998; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, it also takes a different form; while Americans and EU citizens find themselves increasingly piecing together part time jobs and “gig work,” often struggling to find one position which offers the once normative 5 day, 40-hour work week, Serbians – at least those who are employed – still tend to work in full-time positions. Instead, their precaritization comes from the disappearance of permanent work contracts which marked the European socialist sphere more than anywhere else on the globe (Hann & Parry 2018). While work seems to continue to be largely “full time” in Serbia, precaritization has taken the form of low wages and temporariness, as seen with the rise of “loophole contract” labor. This strange precaritization has led to bizarre news announcements such as, “Every fifth young Serbian is a business owner” (Beta 2016) gravely misrecognizing the fact that to be a “business owner” in Serbia usually is more akin to an indefinitely placed “temporary contractor” in the United States. That is, local and foreign companies (often practicing “nearshoring,” or offshoring labor to nearby peripheral nations) across Serbia hire what would have once been permanent workers as self-registered “contractors” through a loophole in labor laws, thus denying them pensions and benefits through the state. A comment on the news article summarized the critique better than I could:

“Simply, many companies, especially the IT sector, do not have employees, but the people who work there are treated as entrepreneurs with flat-rate taxation. Profit for the boss, short-term profit for the worker and loss for the state. These are the young people who have their own businesses.”

Many of my friends and acquaintances were hired on such contracts, and thus had few labor protections, including rights to parental leave or unemployment insurance if they were suddenly made “redundant” and laid off. Often, however, these younger workers were

happy to be hired as such, as they did not believe that a pension would exist for them anyway by the time they made it to retirement age and would rather have the extra “short-term profit” that the commenter above alludes to. Others were hired on as regular employees on temporary contracts, but their earnings were reported as minimum wages in order for the business owners to pay lower taxes; the rest of their salaries often came in cash envelopes. Alongside essentially stealing the pensions of their workers, this creates other problems. For example, if one wanted to take out a mortgage credit, they could not prove that they had enough income to support it. Likewise, it affected unemployment and maternity leave claims, as both benefits are calculated as a percentage of reported wages.

In following “everyday life” in Serbia over five years, the sheer amount of data I collected is impossible to fit cohesively into one dissertation. Thus, I focus on what the future appears as under the “blocked future” as a central focal point, from the various key perspectives of transitioning from education to work, housing, reproduction, and the state. In this somewhat grim focus on disappointment, what is missing here are the moments of joy my participants describe in everyday life, both in Serbia and abroad. I hope that the humor in our conversations translates throughout these pages — and that, despite the often-pessimistic outlook on life in Serbia, whoever reads this understands that it is nevertheless something which can be joked about. These jokes can come as moments of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2016), laughing at our own national shame — such as the enormous waste that was the construction of the Slavija fountain, which, for months, regaled the neighborhood with what seemed to be a mix ranging from Michael Jackson to Mozart¹⁰ — or simply finding humor in what often feels like an absurd situation, like that of *Billy Jean* blasting at the largest intersection in the city throughout the day and night being somehow

¹⁰ Exactly how much of an “intimacy” the telling of national shames is in this context is up for debate. We may argue that people from the Balkans are quite open to sharing these national shames with insiders and outsiders, as many ethnographers of the region attest of the supportive interlocutors who shared their time and thoughts. Sometimes, discussing and joking about these sources of “shame” feel like a national pastime, a joyful moment to surprise an outsider about the complexity of the space one occupies (Hirschman 2013) or a hailing of an “impartial” witness to the absurdity one lives in. As I rode back from the airport in a taxi with my American friends who had come for a visit, I explained the recent construction of the Slavija fountain to them as we passed next to it. The taxi driver made sure to add, “go on, don’t feel ashamed to tell them what an idiotic travesty it is.”

seen as an “improvement,” while the traffic congestion and pedestrian complaints remained unresolved despite the massive infrastructure project.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

Like my participants often said when qualifying their discontent, my intent is not to paint a dismal picture of Serbia. I see many positives to life in the country and, given the choice under hospitable individual material conditions, I would admittedly stay (some friends found this to be absurd, at times laughing about it, and at other times almost angry at me that I would suggest such a thing, while others empathized). My point is to draw together the various tropes of critique and discontent circulating in private and public spheres, which combine into a ubiquitous discourse which sees the future as “blocked” in Serbia and thus drives the prevalent desires for emigration in the country – alongside creating the impetus for very real migrations.

I come to this phrasing of the “blocked future” from the various framings of Serbia’s prolonged transition from state socialism to market capitalism as a “blocked” and “unblocked” transformation (cf. Mojić 2016; Bobić 2014; Lazić 2015; Petrović 2001). I argue that, as Serbia’s “unblocked transition” strove to “catch up” to market reforms — including, but not limited to, the mass and rapid privatization of the state-owned firms, the deregulation of labor which resulted in the rise of a massive grey economy, austerity measures across the public sector, and the consequent rising inequalities as a result of these factors — Serbia’s population saw themselves in a state of progressive precaritization across the class scale. In a series of political disappointments stretching across the 2000s and 2010s, the broader population largely came to distrust the political sphere to change their material conditions. Thus, the transition from a “blocked” to an “unblocked transformation” brought instead a “blocked future.” While the Yugoslav socialist period was heavily ideologically imbued with a future-oriented utopian vision (Erdei 2013) which Bauman called “solid modernity” (Bauman 2010), the “end of history” which was signified by the fall of state socialism in the Soviet union (Fukuyama 1992), and shortly thereafter

Yugoslavia, brings neither progress nor regress — things are simply as they are, and the present stretches into most possible imaginations of the future (Nowotny 1994). This dissertation moves between analyzing what people *want* in seeing a domestic “blocked future” and trying to understand the history, politics, economics, and cultural structures that explain *why they want it*. In focusing on the concept of a desired “normal life,” the following chapters likewise structure themselves around the core organizing aspects of transitions to adulthood or independence once seen in the modern era: education and the transition to employment, independent housing, reproduction, and the state.

As I explain in Chapter 1, Serbians continue to hold on to an increasingly globally “outdated” concept of the vocational calling, inculcated during the socialist period, and torn asunder by the flexibilization of work and permanency under late modernity. In this sense, Western academics may be the most capable of empathizing with the postsocialist European sphere’s youth, themselves highly specialized and emotionally tied to their vocational calling, investing years into obtaining the highly sought-after yet increasingly elusive permanent tenure-track position, yet facing a constricted and retracting market with the potential of “working below their qualifications.” Likewise, academics know well the importance of “veze” (connections) in navigating such markets, as who you know is often as important as what you know. Here, I show how instead of looking to formalized channels of advancement, they frame their futures as potentially anomic “futureless” places where aspirations are seen as meaningless and a participation in cruel optimism, as shaped the unequal fates of luck and chance domestically, or as projected onto purportedly “meritocratic” structures abroad.

In Chapter 2, I explore how the biographical uncertainty which looms within the sphere of work and social institutions drives my interlocutors to center owned housing as a way to maintain certainty into the future. I show how the meaning of housing has refashioned from the Yugoslav era to today, and how the high rate of homeownership brought through the mass privatization of social housing (alongside a mortgage market which never quite developed) has created new inequalities when people look to their futures. In looking at how my interlocutors frame housing as a form of ontological security that allows them to have faith in their individual future, I show how owned housing provides some young

people with the capacity to aspire in narrating their potential emigrations, while others feel their emigration is obligatory to get to this point of owned housing in Serbia's super-home ownership context.

In Chapter 3, I turn from the "blocked future" discourse which appears to come "from below," to a state-sanctioned discourse of national death as looming from Serbia's low fertility rates, which has colloquially been dubbed the "white plague." As Serbia's government has urged its citizens to reproduce "for the future of the nation," I take my interlocutors and broader news commenters' critiques to this pronatalist policy to show how pleas to producing the nation's *long future* are ineffective when people cannot see an individual future for themselves while living under widespread material constraints. I likewise show how these postponed or contracted desires for childbearing are shaped by historical processes, namely the Yugoslav ideology of the happy child, and the 1990s amplification of the mode of parenthood as "sacrifice."

In Chapter 4, I look at how my interlocutors center the state as the "great organizer," while seeing their own state as one marked by disorganization, chaos, and corruption, and thus a great *disorganizer*. I argue that, in seeing so much power in the state, my interlocutors see themselves under the rule of a state apparatus which seems to function at the whims of politicians and an entrenched partocracy, alongside an increasing incomprehensible bureaucratic apparatus. In this "disorganization," rational action appears impossible, and thus constrains people from acting "morally" under the impoverishment of disorganization. In placing their desires to live in an "organized country" abroad, they presume themselves to be able to act rationally – according to well-outlined rules which apply to all people, and thus as citizens with "obligations and entitlements" to the state – which translates to moral competence. However, while this vision of morality as springing from state organization serves as a protective shield against individualizing blame at home, it likewise creates an increased pressure to "succeed" abroad, resulting in those who struggle in their emigrations being seen as (and, importantly, seeing themselves as) morally tainted.

CHAPTER 1: FUTURELESSNESS, MIGRATION, OR A LUCKY BREAK: NARRATIVE TROPES OF THE 'BLOCKED FUTURE' AMONG SERBIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

This chapter was previously published as an article online in the *Journal of Youth Studies* in May 2019 and appeared in print in April 2020. It is presented here in its entirety based on the final submission to the journal and cited in this dissertation (Anđić 2020) in accordance with the guidelines of Taylor & Francis.

INTRODUCTION

Jay MacLeod wrote that 'aspirations provide a conceptual link between structure and agency in that they are rooted firmly in individual proclivity (agency) but also are acutely sensitive to perceived societal constraints (structure)' (2009, 139). Following this line of thought, imaginations of the personal future — especially related to employment aspirations under the context of rising uncertainty — have become an important topic of research in youth studies (Abbott et al. 2010; Borlagdan 2015; Bryant and Ellard 2015; Cairns et al. 2014; Cook 2016a, 2016b; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Heggli, Haukanes, and Tjomsland 2013; Howie and Campbell 2016; Leccardi 2012; Schoon and Mortimer 2017; Sica et al. 2016; Tomanović and Ignjatović 2006). However, both the methodological and theoretical means to approach the relationship between youth aspirations and macro-historical change remain subject to some debate, most visible between scholars who side with a 'choice biography' approach to contemporary transitions to adulthood and those who emphasize Bourdieusian social reproduction (Roberts 2010, 2012; Threadgold 2011; Woodman 2009; Wyn and Woodman 2009).

The reflexive ‘do-it-yourself’ or ‘choice biography’ – often tied to Beck’s (1992) and Giddens’s (1991) theorizations of late modernity and reflexivity – implies that youth, at least in the West, are tasked with carving their own personal biographies in the face of de-standardized transitions to adulthood and shifting institutional structures. The theoretical approach has been charged with dismissing the role of structure (Roberts 2010), with a particular focus on individual material constraints on youth (Atkinson 2010; Mojić 2016; Roberts 2010; Tomanović and Ignjatović 2006).

In re-readings of Beck’s work, others have stated that these critiques are somewhat unfair (Threadgold 2011; Woodman 2009), with Woodman (2009) noting that the choice biography has been used as a foil to argue against in youth studies literature, where the ‘elective’ quality of the concept is emphasized while sidelining Beck’s writings on structure. In this paper, I argue that the ‘elective’ aspect of the choice biography is nevertheless a useful tool when identified as a powerful discourse demonstrating how personal biographies *should* develop in liberal democracies. Whether or not a choice biography represents lived reality, the perceived denial of ‘choice’ in liberal democracies ‘may be interpreted as a denial of citizenship’ (Walther 2006; see also Bauman 1998) by those who feel structural constraints intimately, thus significantly shaping how youth understand their present and future.

This article uses ethnographic discourse analysis, Gowan’s (2010) more discourse-sensitive reworking of Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method, to understand how Serbian high school students at Belgrade Professional (BP) respond to coursework and discussions about their personal futures. Contextualizing the conversations at BP within broader local and international social forces, the paper shows how students’ perceptions of their future chances are mediated by both the school’s outdated promises of secure skilled employment and a widespread pro-migration discourse which understands Western democracies as ‘fair’ or meritocratic when contrasted with perceived wide-spread corruption in Serbia. I show how these powerful cultural structures shape school culture, youth perceptions and aspirations, and expected actions. In short, I argue that BP students recognize the elective ‘choice biography’ as a real pathway to adulthood. However, they primarily imagine the choice biography exists outside of Serbia, while feeling constrained

by — even hostile to — such an idea within the country. To counter choice biography framings of futures in Serbia, students mobilize a discourse I call the ‘blocked future,’ comprised of three related narrative tropes informed by the decades-long recession: domestic futurelessness, meritocracy abroad, and local chance. In using ‘blocked future’ discourse to discuss their aspirations, students respond to and shield themselves from the tendency of ‘choice’ framings to encourage self-blame for unachieved goals (Beck 1992) by pointing to the complex web of economic, social, and political structures around them which constrain their chances of success. However, in doing so, they also rearticulate these structures as static forces which have little hope of changing, understanding the navigation of this system as one significantly determined by ‘luck.’

TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD IN EUROPE AND SERBIA

Youth scholars broadly agree that transitions to adulthood in industrialized nations have become less standardized than in previous generations (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; EGRIS 2001; Heggli et al. 2013; McDonald et al. 2011; Walther 2006). Contrasted with earlier predominantly linear age-coupled trajectories, contemporary youth face what have been variously termed ‘fragmented,’ ‘yo-yo,’ or ‘de-standardized’ transitions to adulthood (EGRIS 2001). These terms encompass a sense of economic and social uncertainty, alongside a withdrawal of state welfare institutions and labor protections. Individually, they may be experienced as returning to the parental household after living independently, re-entering education after beginning a career, or other ‘back and forth’ movements.

However, transitions to adulthood have not been evenly de-standardized across the globe. Instead, they are shaped by state transitional regimes which guide young people’s trajectories to produce varied outcomes. Within Europe alone, four forms of contrasting transitional regimes have been identified (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Walther 2006): liberal, social democratic/universalistic, vocation-oriented/conservative, and Southern European/sub-protective.

States with liberal regimes (e.g. Great Britain, Ireland, the US) are characterized by individualization, weak social welfare provision, flexible vocational orientation, and low employment security (ibid.), in contrast to universalistic regimes (e.g. Denmark, Sweden) which allow young people to explore careers while backed by comparatively generous social welfare provisions and supportive state institutions (Walther 2006; Türken et al. 2016; Heggli et al. 2013). The vocation-oriented regimes (e.g. Austria, Germany, the Netherlands) are marked by somewhat conservative welfare provision, though heavy investment in vocational education and strong education-to-work pipelines help support transitions to independence and continue relatively linear transitions for youth. Compared against these three, sub-protective regimes (e.g. Spain, Italy, Portugal) lack vocational orientations in education, have low social welfare support, and constrained labor markets with high levels of informal employment. Under sub-protective transition regimes, the family is the primary provider of social support and young people experience delays in all major transition events, such as extended time to complete education, moving out of the parental household, full-time formal employment, and family formation (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011).

Post-socialist transition regimes have been under-theorized in the European sphere (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Walther 2006). However, researchers have started to analyze them as ‘hybrid regimes’ (Mojić 2016), still morphing from the universalistic and vocation-oriented transition regimes of the socialist past into increasingly sub-protective regimes (Kovacheva 2001).

EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT, SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA TO CONTEMPORARY SERBIA

Serbia retains the public education system of the vocation-oriented socialist period, with secondary schools separated into *gimnazije* (4-year general high schools directed towards university entrance), professional schools (4-year technical schools aimed at white-collar professions), and vocational schools (3-year technical schools teaching working-class trades). Professional and vocational schools are effective at establishing students’ identities as specialized workers at an early age, as students graduate with certificates for work in a

named vocation rather than deciding at the university level or once they enter the labor force.

During the Yugoslav period, admittance into schools was structured by quotas determined through a partnership of the state and businesses (Smirnov 2008), bolstering a strong education-to-employment pipeline for professional and vocational students (Kovacheva 2001). Today, while public sector employment — which accounts for about one third of total employment in Serbia (Vladisavljević 2017) — remains heavily oriented around these credentials, enrollment in secondary and tertiary schools is no longer limited by the planned economy, causing the production of specialized surplus labor.

Youth unemployment in Serbia is especially high. During my research in early 2016, 44.2% of those ages 15-24 actively seeking work were unemployed, while the country's overall unemployment rate was 19.7% (SORS 2016a). Wages had also stagnated, with the January 2016 average Belgrade wage at 420 euros (SORS 2016b) on par with the cost of living for a single adult without housing costs. Overall, young Serbians who were not given or inherited housing from their families have a difficult time transitioning to autonomous living: 67% of youth aged 20-24, and 49.9% of those aged 25-29, still lived in their parental homes in 2015 (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015). Two thirds of those living independently either inherited or live in housing purchased by their families, indicating the enduring significance of familial resources in young Serbians' lives even after achieving some markers of adulthood (ibid.). Facing high levels of economic precarity yet ingrained with identities as specialized workers, Serbian youth experience what Reiter (2010) calls 'biographical uncertainty,' unsure that their education will translate to the careers they are trained for or allow for the attainment of traditional markers of adulthood their parents were able to achieve.

ASPIRATIONS IN THE 'PERMANENT TRANSITION'

Life course researchers warn of the long-term 'scarring effects' of transitioning to adulthood during economic recessions on self-esteem and initiative (Johnson et al. 2017),

perceptions of the value of individual effort (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014), distrust in government institutions (Schoon and Mortimer 2017), along with the destabilizing economic impacts of delayed entrance into the full-time labor force (Chauvel 2010). In the case of Serbia, these effects may impact multiple generations as economic instability has plagued the country since the 1990s. While Serbia's post-socialist break with the Milošević era and transformation to a market economy was received with a wave of enthusiasm for young people, anticipating that they will benefit most from the change (Mojić 2012; Horvat and Štiks 2012), the long-term consequences of this transition have increased the sense of insecurity and injustice.

Importantly, there are growing discrepancies between how young people perceive social advancement 'really functions' and how it 'should function' (Mojić 2012). Mojić's work shows that in 2003, young people ranked 'a good education' (attainable cultural capital) and 'market'-individual traits ('hard work,' 'ambition,' and 'willingness to take risks') as the primary means of advancement in Serbia, reflecting a belief in the new market-oriented social order despite the 'transitional' context. By 2011, this confidence had 'cooled out': education and individual attributes were progressively displaced by 'knowing the right people' (social capital), 'wealthy origin' (economic capital), and 'political engagement' (i.e. social capital through ruling party membership¹¹) as the dominant perceived modes of advancement. However, 'a good education' and 'hard work' remained the main indicated factors of a *desired* social order reported in both 2007 and 2011 (ibid.).

¹¹ Trust in political parties is especially low among Serbian youth: in 2015, only 11.67% of youth responded that they trust political parties 'a lot' or 'to some extent,' while 57.5% responded 'not at all' (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015). The authors note that youth who join parties may see membership as an instrumental tool to gain access to resources, considering the high percentage of inactive membership (ibid.). Recent cultural and political events in Serbia reflect this widespread sentiment of distrust of the political sphere and instrumental party participation. For example, in the 2017 presidential election a satirical candidate developed by communications students from Mladenovac, *Ljubiša 'Beli' Preletačević* ('Preletačević' most proximately translating to Turncoat-ević in English – pointing to the tendency of Serbian political figures to switch parties for personal gain) garnered nearly 10 percent of the vote (Petrović 2018). In the same election, former Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić was elected president, resulting in weeks of protests across the country. Dubbed the 'Protests Against Dictatorship,' participants charged the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) with election fraud, voter intimidation, and hegemonic control over media outlets. Among the many 'blockages' towards the future, the political sphere in Serbia is similarly viewed as an unchangeable barrier to progress.

Table 1. Desired versus perceived social order in Serbia by year, adapted from Mojić (2012).

Desired Social Order		Perceived Social Order		
2007 & 2011	Rank	2003	2007	2011
Good Education	1	Good Education	Knowing the Right People	Knowing the Right People
Hard Work	2	'Market'-Individual Attributes	Good Education	Wealthy Origin
Ambition	3		Hard Work, Political Engagement, Ambition	Political Engagement

Rank indicates popularity as primary factor for advancement for the 'Desired Social Order,' and cumulative rating of first, second and third most important factors for advancement for the 'Perceived Social Order.' For 2007 Rank 3 of the Perceived Social Order, 'Hard Work,' 'Political Engagement' and 'Ambition' were closely positioned (within 2 percentage points).

Further, while in 2003 50.7% of young people reported 'high earnings' as the most important factor they search for in work, that number had fallen to 33% by 2011, partly displaced by 'job security, without the risk that the firm will close and I will be left unemployed,' which accounted for 28.3% of responses (Mojić 2016). Interestingly, while 9.4% had reported 'a creative job where I can express my capabilities' as the most important factor in 2003, that number had fallen to just 3.4% of responses (ibid.) by 2011, indicating a move away from understanding work as personal fulfillment and self-expression (Bauman 1998) and instead to something which primarily provides material stability. These shifting sentiments reflect the material risks workers face in a context of rapid privatization, unstable private firms, and frequent layoffs of 'contract' workers with few labor rights. These risks were exacerbated after the implementation of austerity measures across Southern Europe following the 2008 Global Recession, resulting in a lack of trust in the European Union to help Serbia transition to a liberal democracy (Tomanović

and Stanojević 2015). The lengthy and ongoing EU accession process has failed to maintain the link between liberal ideology (e.g. hard work resulting in personal success) and material reality.

Nearly 30 years after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the ‘transition’ aspect of the post-socialist transition to liberal democracy seems dubious in Serbia. Horvat and Štiks (2012) have dubbed this prolonged transitional state a ‘desert,’ questioning whether ‘stabilization’ will ever arrive. The emergent regime of transitions to adulthood leaves young people in Serbia (and the broader Balkans) in a strange position: the vocation-oriented education system continues to give young people identities as specialized workers, while the state can no longer fulfill the education system’s promise of employment. Instead, youth are increasingly left to depend on familial support as they enter adulthood.

While Mojić’s (2012, 2016) quantitative data contributes great insight into how Serbian youth have understood the new social order over time, pairing it with discursive analysis highlights how a concept like ‘advancement’ – a traditionally durable discourse – can shift so rapidly in one country. As BP students discuss the future, their conversations hook into and reveal cultural structures – discourses which emerge to make sense of and cope with conflicting structural demands – and show how youth and the broader society mentally *process* the structural constraints and unfulfilled promises of post-socialism in everyday life.

BELGRADE PROFESSIONAL AS A FIELD SITE

Situated within a broader project on transitions to adulthood and migration aspirations in Serbia, this article focuses on an ethnography of how young people imagine the future within the school context. In 2015-16 I spent one academic year following a class I call ‘4-Z,’ comprised of 30 students (ages 18-19) in their final year of high school at Belgrade Professional. I attended courses, excursions, and school events, including a trip to the EU with the whole 4th grade (or senior) class and the senior prom (*matursko veče*). To gain insight into students’ views outside of formal coursework, in December, January, and

April, I conducted three hour-long small group discussions with 12 of the 4-Z students (3-5 students each) about their plans for the future. I am bilingual in Serbo-Croatian and English, and all my fieldwork took place in Serbian except one conversation with advanced English students practicing the language. I wrote field notes in English with quotations in Serbian. To preserve the anonymity of my participants, the school's and all personal names are pseudonyms.

Belgrade Professional is one of ten schools in the Belgrade district which offers some form of economics track. Within the district, BP is an 'average' public¹² school — the amount of primary school points needed for admittance is not as high as the more prestigious *gimanzije*, some of which require near-perfect scores from students, nor as low as the schools oriented towards more working-class career tracks, such as machinists and bakers. In the 2016/17 school year, 63.6% of secondary school graduates attended a professional school, with 'economics, law, and administration' as the most popular specialization (SORS 2018a).

BP provides vocational training which (theoretically) allows students to enter the workforce immediately, along with the option of university enrollment upon completion without further coursework. About one third of students enter higher education immediately after completing their degree at BP, although professors report that the majority of their students eventually go on to higher education. The 4-Z class head, for example, elaborated:

Twenty years ago [we could] sign people up for work in the bank [...] We had contracts with them. Now they won't take one student. We can't get them to take [students] for internships (*praksa*) because the banks are so closed off now. We're supposed to have two types of tracks, one that prepares you to work right away and the other that prepares you for college. About 90 percent end up going to college.

¹² Although private secondary education in Serbia is expanding, the percent of students attending private schools in Serbia is still very low. In the 2017/18 school year, 1.5% of secondary students in Serbia attended private schools (SORS 2018b). For comparison, in 2016, neighboring Croatia had a rate of approximately 2.3% private school enrollment, Germany at 9.4%, while the EU average was 26.11% (World Bank EdStats 2019).

There are just no jobs. They're very educated, they could work at a bank, but they can't get the jobs – they'll end up working in some retail store or something.

Like all schools in Serbia, BP does not take data about the income levels or employment of students' parents, as this is seen as having the potential to result in discrimination. There is therefore no statistically viable way to find out the socioeconomic status of students' families. However, class heads, who do ask their students some information in order to get to know them, describe the students as mostly 'lower-middle class' — their parents have largely completed secondary school, with many parents having completed tertiary degrees. The form of education Belgrade Professional offers is oriented towards reproducing lower-middle-class white-collar workers, such as bank tellers, bookkeepers and administrative office workers. Further, while the state distributes relatively equal funding to all public schools based on enrollment and faculty numbers, Belgrade Professional does not appear to benefit from the private financial or service contributions that boost schools with better-off or well-connected families.

CONTEXTUALIZING NARRATIVES OF THE FUTURE

As I showed above, transitions to adulthood in Serbia have become increasingly precarious for young people with the breakdown of the education-to-employment pipeline which supported the vocationally-oriented socialist system. Growing up in this 'hybrid transition regime,' somewhere between vocational and sub-protective, leaves young people feeling vulnerable and confused about their prospects. They are trained for and gain identities as specialized workers, yet anticipate high unemployment and underemployment rates, difficulties in attaining independence, and increasingly must depend on familial support well into their 30s.

In the following sections, I argue that Belgrade Professional students mobilize three intertwined narrative tropes that have become prevalent frames for discussing the future in post-transition Serbia: domestic futurelessness, meritocracy abroad, and local chance. To do this, I start by illustrating how schooling looks in an 'ideal-typical' vocational course,

Accounting, compared to unconventional coursework in Civics class which asks students to engage in a ‘do-it-yourself’ future biography. I then move to small-group discussions, showing how 4-Z students are highly attuned to broadly perceived transnational structures of advancement which make their goals seem primarily achievable through migration or, locally, heavily dependent on luck rather than the individual choices they make. Together, these tropes signify a ‘blocked future’ approach to individual biographies which points to contradictory and constraining structures as the core hindrance to achieving personal aspirations.

ACCOUNTING AS AN IDEAL TYPE

As I followed Professor Ilić into Accounting, the students would become silent and stand at their desks. Once she said they could sit, they quickly did so, opening their workbooks to the indicated page. Asking the week’s selected student helper to wipe the last subject’s text as she followed him, the professor would write on somewhat moist chalkboard while simultaneously lecturing about tax brackets and organization types. As the board dried, the text would appear in neat Cyrillic, showing accounting problems for the students to solve. The professor then called on the students, who verbally worked through the assignment as the student helper wrote down their results on the board.

In the silence of work, the professor periodically joked with the students, asking one boy why he had not invested in a more expensive pencil after his broke (‘You’re an economist!’ she said, ‘You should know one quality pencil will last you all year compared to five of the ones from the Chinese boutiques at the same price!’). The students giggled at her cajoling, only joked back at their own expense, and never talked to each other during class. 4-Z students favored Professor Ilić, citing the subject’s practicality, but also her demeanor; acknowledging her somewhat stern nature, they discussed how much she cares about them practically. She was not the type to tell students to ‘follow their dreams,’ but instead to focus on something that will give them options for work. She cited bookkeeping as a

practical skill that, ‘almost any business needs, and you can do as side work while you go to college.’

Teacher-centered and lecture-oriented with little room for discussion, Accounting class demonstrated an ideal-typical professional school course. Its design mirrored working in an office: students individually completed tasks under direction, with some consultation with their student colleagues. In the process of imbuing this technical knowledge, along with periodic identification of students by their vocational track, Accounting class worked to ingrain a vocational identity among Belgrade Professional high schoolers. Focusing on concrete tasks in the present rather than the reflective work of planning for the future, Accounting class soothed the anxieties of biographical uncertainty (Reiter 2010) the students faced. It promised that one can work even if employment is scarce, while consolidating an identity the inherited socialist education system continues to produce: the calling, and the learning of skills to labor in it.

ASPIRATIONS IN CIVICS CLASS: DOMESTIC FUTURELESSNESS

While professors frequently discussed their students’ futures with me, there was a surprising lack of conversation about the future in classes. Professors noted this was in part due to the teacher-centered lectures and focus on ‘encyclopedic’ knowledge common in Serbia (Smirnov 2008). However, an economics professor stated other constraints:

I never had time to talk to them about the future, with how much material there is to cover. I could start the conversation at the end of the class with a few students, I guess, but you have another professor coming in immediately after. There was just no time. And then, — honestly, it’s hard to talk about the future here. How do you talk about something that’s so unstable?

Here, the professor introduces a trope I call ‘domestic futurelessness.’ The lack of predictability in contemporary Serbian society made it difficult to talk to her students about a future which she personally struggled to imagine agentic pathways to navigate.

Nevertheless, contrasting with the present-time flow of Accounting, Professor Nikolić took up the challenge of discussing the future in her Civics class, a controversial secular counterpart to Religious Studies introduced in 2001 where civic engagement is emphasized and enacted through dialogic pedagogy and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices. SEL has gained popularity in school curricula across the globe (Bartholdsson, Gustafsson-Lundberg, and Hultin 2014; Frydenberg, Martin, and Collie 2017), aiming to address students' social and emotional development through teaching self-discipline, managing emotions, goal setting, decision-making (Yeager 2017; Durlak et al. 2017). These goals apply neatly to what employers call the 'soft skills' component of human capital, including traits such as self-management, communication, flexibility, positivity, and teamwork, which align well with the demands of service sectors and knowledge economies (Smirnov 2008). They also undergird the 'choice biography' as an appropriate approach to the life course by asking students to take charge of their individual futures through instilling goal-orientation, self-direction, and calculated planning. As the Serbian education system still focuses on technical skills and knowledge acquisition for the labor force, 4-Z's students struggled with SEL pedagogy the most. To show this pedagogical conflict and illustrate the trope of domestic futurelessness as it is mobilized by students, I focus on a day in Civics class in September 2015:

The subject of the day was professionalization. As Professor Nikolić described the day's tasks, the students talked loudly to each other, breaking the norms of silence and obedience I observed in other courses. She noted that last week they discussed their strengths as individuals and as a collective, and what their plans might be. Today, they would build on that to discuss what they want to do after high school, 'whether it's signing up for a college or not going to college and going to work,' she made sure to add. 'We'll be analyzing through this table,' she held up a sheet of paper, 'reasons for what you plan to do. So, write: why are you signing up for this or that thing,' inadvertently implying further education, 'then reasons why you want to do this, and then two additional statements about what it accomplishes.'

The students seemed frustrated or uninterested and continued talking amongst themselves. The two girls next to me, Ana and Nina, kept saying, 'I don't know what to write,' and,

‘this is pointless.’ Ana said, louder, ‘what does it matter? Whatever we write, we won’t have work after this.’ Understanding the idea of planning as futile, Ana cited structural unemployment as a primary constraint to even *writing* about her goals.

Disregarding their comments, Professor Nikolić continued, ‘For example, you might sign up for the Economics Faculty because you like economics, because you have experience in it, and so on. ... You might also want to go to a [specific] school because you can work and go to school at the same time, and you would find that important because it would mean you can move out of your parents’ house.’ The girls repeated dismissively, ‘I just don’t know what to write.’ The professor responded, ‘Well, this forces you to think about it, whatever it is. It’s just an exercise to get you to look at the logic of what you’re thinking.’ While Ana and Nina feel stuck, Professor Nikolić ascribes to the ‘choice biography’ narrative of the future by identifying aspirations, including goals of independence or working in a fulfilling field, and reflexive planning on how to achieve them, as important work.

After a few minutes, Professor Nikolić asked the class who wants to put their work up on the back of the old poster she taped to the door behind her. A quieter boy, Ivan, volunteers.

Ivan: ‘I want to enroll in the economics faculty.’

Professor: ‘Okay,’ writing it down, ‘What’s your reason?’

Ivan: ‘It has a lot of different jobs you can do’ and the professor instead writes down and verbalizes, ‘It has a lot of job prospects.’

Professor: ‘Okay, what is your logic here?’

Ivan: ‘I can find a job that way.’

Professor: ‘And the secondary meaning?’

Ivan: ‘My parents don’t have to take care of me. They work, I should work too.’

Professor: ‘Okay, what’s next?’

Ivan: 'I have prior knowledge'

Professor Nikolić writes down 'I have prior knowledge in economics.' Noting to the class, 'You all have a much better ability in [economics] than the people from the gimnazije.'

Ivan and Professor Nikolić deconstructed the process of achieving his goals, and as he described them in everyday language, she reframed them in professionalized terms, for example, reiterating his statement of 'It has a lot of different jobs you can do' into 'It has a lot of job prospects.' Echoing Professor Nikolić's earlier statement, Ivan said that part of the reason he wants to enroll in the Economics Faculty is to be able to establish financial independence, adding that, as independence's inverse, he does not want to be a burden on his parents. Rather than stating economics as a personally desirable or fulfilling field, he, too, looked to his perceptions of the economy to plan his future. Unlike Ana, however, he saw the field as one where he could have opportunities for employment.

As Professor Nikolić continued to lead Ivan through his remaining reasons for enrolling in the Economics Faculty, Ana interjected from across the small room, 'I want to be a designer, but there's no work like that here.' She was clearly frustrated at this point. She and Nina looked at their nails, snickering. Marko laughed, 'That's ok, she'll have a job later, she's a capitalist.' He added when students look at him incredulously, '...What? Her dad owns a store! What store is it?' The professor said, ignoring Marko, 'You bring up a great point. Should we go towards what we want to do or what there are jobs for?' Ana replied with an encompassing, 'Come on, don't bore/burden/exhaust me' (*Nemoj da mi dosaduješ*). Andrej said, 'Of course we should do what we want!' Someone else added, 'But that's not always up to us, our parents want us to do certain things' and the professor responded, 'Well this is a conversation that needs to be had with parents, that maybe they're not on the same page, but doing what you want is good for you.'

The overall interaction points to how the topic of future career planning becomes an enactment of instilling the 'choice biography' as a legitimate mode of transition for youth as students are encouraged to pursue their dream careers or careers that will help them reach other goals. While Marko pointed to the inequalities within the classroom itself,

quipping to Ana that, ‘she’ll have a job later,’ he misunderstood Ana’s annoyance: his statement that she will have *a* job — rather than the job she aspires to — did not address her frustration with facing the idea of following your dreams in her local context. However, Ana sees no point in either orienting herself towards a seemingly non-existent market, nor aspiring towards an emotionally satisfying calling. In her response, she recognized Professor Nikolić’s question as a form of what Berlant (2011) calls ‘cruel optimism’: it may sustain students’ everyday life by allowing them to imagine better futures, escape from present-day anxieties, or even inculcate a habitus that produces better individual economic outcomes, but in the most imaginable future for some students, it creates aspirations that will be attenuated by high unemployment and underemployment. Instead, Ana and Nina leaned on the trope of ‘domestic futurelessness’ to counteract the ‘choice biography’ tasks they had been assigned. Ana cited structural constraints — rather than personal lack of initiative, implicit in the assignment — as the primary factor preventing her from achieving her goals in Serbia and refused to engage in the assignment.

Although Ana’s interjection of ‘don’t bore me’ pointedly rejected Professor Nikolić’s goal of instilling future orientations, frustration marked the entirety of the class hour. Many students voiced boredom, while others interrupted by criticizing Ivan’s grades during his time to share. While this entire dynamic could be more indicative of 4-Z itself than Serbian students’ general frustration at patterned future planning, it seems to be a combination of factors: an anxiety-inducing topic hanging over students nearing their entrance into adulthood, discussed in a group where many share these fears yet are frustrated at others who engage in practices viewed as futile, in a class where the professor’s dialogic pedagogical style encouraged group discussions and collaboration that the students found foreign and chaotic compared to their traditional teacher-centered courses.

Wrapping up the lesson, Professor Nikolić said, ‘You can go to school here, you can start working maybe, or maybe your plan is to leave Serbia — how do you plan for that?’ Marko said, ‘We shouldn’t leave Serbia, professor, we should try and make it better here.’ She responded, ‘Sure, but leaving is sometimes what someone sees as their best option, that’s valid too.’ He replies, eventually, ‘Yeah, there’s nothing that’s going to come of the economy here.’ While Marko offered a counter-discourse of mobilizing to improve the

country – acknowledging the future as currently ‘blocked’ but changeable – in the end even he and Professor Nikolić acknowledged Ana’s ‘futureless’ rhetoric as legitimate.

LUCK AT HOME, AGENTIC ‘CHOICE BIOGRAPHIES’ ABROAD

I now turn to the small group discussions to contextualize two related tropes students mobilized at Belgrade Professional: ‘meritocracy abroad’ and ‘local chance.’ As Professor Nikolić said, some students see moving abroad as their best option, and, indeed, about half of young people in Serbia report an intent to emigrate (Mojić and Petrović 2013), while only 30.8% percent say that they do not want to leave the country (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015). In a small group conversation with an English club consisting of four students and their professor, I opened the discussion by asking, ‘what do you want to do when you finish high school?’ Nikola began by saying he wants to open a martial arts studio to teach self-defense. After discussing his experience with physical training and how he feels qualified, I asked, ‘And where do you want to open your shop?’ He responded, ‘It’s a little cliché to say, but honestly, anywhere but here.’ I asked if everyone felt that way, and the other students nodded their heads in agreement. Identifying social capital as a way to succeed in his imagined future abroad, Nikola added, ‘I know some people in Berlin, in Austria, in the UK, someone in Boston, now you in Minneapolis, I think I could do it.’

The hour-long conversation covered a range of student-led topics, and, as they all practiced some form of self-defense, it transitioned to how secure they felt in Belgrade. They pulled back to the landscape of the 90s, often depicted as a ‘wild time’ in Serbia where the mafia ruled the country. Nikola said, ‘I think it’s more important than ever [to practice self-defense] honestly, we didn’t have the type of inequality we have now.’ Larisa continued:

People here are really crazy, we’re just... so on edge. We just can’t catch up with the rest of the world. [...] Croatia and Slovenia, other countries, they’re getting to the standards of the rest of the world, they’re not as violent. But we’re sticking to it, we’re like proud of it. (‘Nationalism!’ adds Nikola, ‘Srbijaaaa!’ mimicking the

football hooligan stereotype and raising his arms) We're Serbian! And it's like we can't have a conversation, a relationship with another country where we're not always talking about hate that people have with each other... We're just stuck in this terrible mentality. I don't want to say we want to stay separate or something, but that we're just trying to keep ourselves out.

In this conversation, Nikola and Larisa describe non-economic reasons to leave Serbia. They connect the violence of the 90s to contemporary nationalism common across the ex-Yugoslav countries. Larisa, like other participants in my fieldwork outside BP, identifies Croatia and Slovenia as 'advancing' faster than Serbia, economically and in becoming more 'European.' When she discusses 'staying separate,' she implies a double-meaning of EU entrance and of the 'civilizing' process of Europeanization (Todorova, 1997).

Like Greenberg's (2011) participants, Larisa and Nikola see Serbia as 'spoiled' both in economic progression, and the ways people themselves have come to behave. Their comments reinforce the narrative of domestic futurelessness, encompassing not only structural constraints of rising inequality and high unemployment, but localizing the international trope that Serbia cannot gain the material standards of 'the rest of the world' — meaning the West — due to persistent nationalism in its individual and political interactions (Subotic and Zarakol 2013; Subotic 2011). Reflecting Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016) findings in Sardinia, imagined mobility allows Nikola and Larisa to construct Serbia as a 'sort of generic antagonist to the rest of the world' (558); the only way to demarcate themselves from the 'terrible mentality' they identify is to leave.

MERITOCRACY, CONNECTIONS, AND LOCAL 'CHANCE BIOGRAPHIES'

Although Larisa and Nikola see Serbia as unsafe, Biljana pointed to other reasons to see international life as better. She began by asking me why public universities are not as highly valued in the US as they are everywhere else. 'Here, if you go to a private college, people think you're dumb or you didn't succeed, they ask you, "Why are you throwing your money

away?” But it’s the opposite in the US,’ she said¹³. I explained that private colleges are relatively new in Serbia, which contributes to their lack of prestige, but that many public universities in the US have highly valued departments. I remembered a professor commenting that her students, ‘don’t understand that you need connections (*veze*) here and there,’ and added that prestigious private universities such as Harvard provide greater opportunities to build social networks that can help alumni get high-status jobs. Biljana responded:

That’s also so different because when you say you got a job through a connection there it’s assumed that you’re able to do the job and smart enough and you just happened to know someone, but here it’s like everybody thinks you’re completely incompetent, like ‘Oh they got that job through a connection. They don’t know anything.’ People there think a lot of writing a letter for someone, because, like if I were writing a letter it reflects on me, so I want the person to be qualified.

In her explanation, Biljana differentiates between how she sees connections functioning in the US and Serbia, distinguishing recommendations based on qualifications against placement into a position through a close tie. As discussed in the literature review, young Serbians express significant discrepancies between how they believe advancement in Serbia ‘should be’ and how it ‘really is,’ emphasizing nepotistic connections by responding that ‘knowing the right people,’ wealthy origin and political engagement are the actual reasons people succeed in Serbian society (Mojić 2012). Biljana identifies connections in Serbia as an unfair advantage for those connected to the well-employed or powerful. She further notes that Serbians who gain employment through connections are seen as incompetent, demonstrating that while there are ‘correct’ ways to use social networks,

¹³ In 2016, 12.88% of tertiary school attendance in Serbia was at private universities, down from 18.68% in 2009 (World Bank EdStats 2019). Private universities have been broadly understood in public discourse as ‘diploma mills’ for those who are able to pay private tuition rates. This was particularly evident in a controversy surrounding the former Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić (served 2012-2017). Nikolić gained the nickname ‘Toma Diploma’ after struggling on a talk show to explain what field his Master’s degree from the Faculty for Economics and Engineering Management in Novi Sad (FIMEK) was finished in, raising suspicions that he bribed someone to receive his credentials.

corrupt connections (*veze*) sever legitimate paths to advancement in post-Yugoslav countries (Brković 2017).

Nikola, Larisa, and Biljana use life abroad as a foil to explain constraints on their career aspirations. Serbia, they argue, is caught in a toxic circle of parochial nationalism, stalled economic development, and workforce nepotism, whereas the US and EU exhibit genuine meritocracy. In doing so, they take an ‘agency in waiting’ (Brun 2015) approach to their futures, identifying an ‘alter space’ where the seemingly insurmountable difficulties they face in Serbia resolve themselves in an imagined life abroad (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016). Like Ana and Nina, they underline that the choice biography is something reserved for those in ‘functioning’ liberal democracies, illustrating that the converse of ‘domestic futurelessness’ is ‘meritocracy abroad,’ where success and failure are thought to hinge on individual choices.

In another group discussion with three students, I ended the conversation by asking, ‘What is the most important thing you can tell me about living in Serbia?’ Immediately, Helena responded ‘*Veze! Veza je obavezna,*’ (Connections! A connection is obligatory), reflecting Biljana’s sentiment. Irena added,

In principle, there’s a sense of injustice here. For example, my brother, who only finished high school, is a director of his own private firm. Some people I know finished Economics Faculties with great scores, and I don’t know, they do work like packing chocolates in boxes. In some way, this country is bad, but at the same time it depends on how it happens for whom, and what your luck is.

As Irena explains that life in Serbia is unjust, she notes a conflict between entitlement to a vocation based on ‘a good education’ against the realities of her acquaintances’ underemployment. Nonetheless, she intends to continue her life in Belgrade. Instead of seeing employment as a meritocratic system, however, she identifies ‘luck’ as an organizer of the future. In places where strong ties — which are logistically difficult to cultivate on a larger scale — significantly shape access to resources, connections to an already scarce

employment base through social capital become more grounded in the realm of chance, of knowing *well* the right person the moment a suitable position opens, rather than utilizing a broad network of weak ties (Sharone 2013). Taking this into account, Irena understands her ‘choice biography’ is more likely to be a ‘chance biography’ in her local context, akin to findings from other constrained employment markets (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014), including academia in the West (Loveday 2017). Using what Woodman (2011) calls ‘preconscious practical strategies’ to cope with inconsistent structural demands, Irena intended to work towards a prestigious, specialized education – an enduring ‘life strategy’ of young Serbians (Mojčić 2012) – to achieve her aspirations, yet simultaneously acknowledged that these credentials will not be the only factor that helps or hinders her from gaining employment. Rather than obscuring the underlying processes which stratify access to work, Irena’s use of ‘luck’ in this conversation about connections acknowledges the arbitrary and inequitable nature of employment when it is drastically organized by close ties, no matter what a person’s qualifications are.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I argued that the elective ‘choice biography’ – despite its controversy as a biographic framework – is a useful concept when understood as a powerful discourse which shapes how advancement and aspirations in liberal democracies are ‘supposed’ to function. To do so, I showed how the choice biography approach is cultivated in the classroom setting at Belgrade Professional, and understood by students as a ‘real’ way that youth aspirations are enacted in Western democracies.

However, how young people understand the structures around them is vital to how they imagine and relate to the future. Faced with tasks such as naming aspirations and planning on how to achieve them, BP students found it difficult to grapple with the structural constraints they perceive in their domestic context and the ‘open’ future they were asked to imagine. Instead, they drew on three interrelated narrative tropes to respond to the individualizing tasks of choice biography questions: domestic futurelessness, meritocracy

abroad, and local chance. In all of these tropes, state-wide economic and social structures loomed over students' imaginations of their personal futures, while an elective biography worked as a refrain for how their transition to adulthood should unfold under 'normal' circumstances. The tropes comprise a coherent discourse of the 'blocked future' in Serbia, which emerges as a cultural structure to process and mediate the conflicting structural demands and constraints youth face while guiding their future action – in this case, towards either emigration or domestically-oriented enactments of preexisting practical strategies whose success, for many, will heavily depend on a lucky break.

The 'blocked future' tropes portray a limited relationship between action and outcome. One points to an immobilizing structure, another to the arbitrary nature of utilizing personal ties, while the third defers individual agency to another geographic space entirely. On one hand, they function as a shielding response to 'choice biography' discourse's individualization of blame for unsuccessful transitions to independence. On the other hand, they also may work to effectively shut down potential alternative discourses which emphasize collective mobilization for local improvement – as Marko aspired to but eventually conceded as being impossible. The contradictory web of economic, social, and political structures in Serbia becomes discursively fixed as an inflexible, entrenched behemoth that can only be navigated (but not changed). The 'blocked future' discourse thus simultaneously signifies both a critique of the current state of affairs and an acquiescence to its enduring existence.

CHAPTER 2: HOUSING CLASS, HOME OWNERSHIP, AND FUTURE INEQUALITIES

While across the board my interlocutors incite a view of the future in Serbia as “blocked,” their inflections on what a “blocked future” individually means shifts depending on their access to material stability in the present and in the foreseeable future. Although the majority of this dissertation is not about inequalities *in* Serbia, one important aspect which arose in the course of my research was how my interlocutors’ relationships to housing tenure shaped their perspectives on the future and emigration. In this chapter, I describe how outright home ownership has come to be seen as the key locus of stability and protection against uncertainty for young people. This contemporary relationship to housing finds its roots in Yugoslav-era social housing (and the discursive understanding of permanent tenancy developed in that period) and the 1990s transition to mass privatization, which resulted in “super-homeownership” in Serbia and across the European post-socialist sphere (Mandič 2010).

In placing the housing situations of my interlocutors into the broader contemporary and historical housing context in post-socialist Serbia, I show how access to independent housing has become a key factor in how young people view their own futures in, and potential emigration out of, the country. I argue that this privatization process, which resulted in stable housing for the majority of Serbia’s population, is the core cause of stability or “normality” which makes the country’s low wages livable. However, when looking further across generations, this foundation of economic and geographic stability is quite precarious. For those who do not own a home, or are not set to inherit one (the primary route to homeownership in the country today), an owned home is imbued with a multitude of meanings. Alongside of course providing shelter, I argue that home ownership is the first and last step to “building a future” for my interlocutors residing in Serbia. In providing

a sense of core material stability, it thus shapes what Appadurai (2012) calls a “capacity to aspire,” the capacity to plan for and have hope in the future.

In analyzing discussions of how owned housing provides a sense of “peace,” I engage a literature on the meanings of housing as providing a sense of “ontological security” (Dupuis & Thorns 1998; Saunders 1990; Giddens 2013). Briefly, ontological security is a sense of trust in the broader constancy of the (increasingly destabilized) world around a person, and their self-identity within it (Giddens 2013). Saunders’s (1990) study of home ownership in the UK after the mass privatization of council housing argued that home ownership enables such a sense of ontological security by providing freedom of control over one’s environment, freedom from surveillance, and a place to be at ease with oneself¹⁴. While I would take issue with the concept of *ownership*, as ownership can be conditional on a mortgage payment and thus fraught with risk and uncertainty (Ronald 2008; Saegert, Fields & Libman 2009), this sentiment of housing as ontological security does apply in the contemporary Serbian context. However, I note that this sentiment arose with the caveat that historically ontological security did not need to mean *ownership*, but some form of unconditional permanent tenancy (whether through outright ownership or use-right, explained below) which marked the Yugoslav era.

As the meaning of home is a reflection of the society around it (Dupuis & Thorns 1998), these meanings need to be rooted in the historical and contemporary context in which they arise. In this chapter, I argue that as the 1990s mass privatization of social housing across the former Yugoslavia transitioned Serbia from a multi-faceted housing regime to a (super) “homeownership society” (Ronald 2008; Vassenden 2014), the meaning of housing changed from something which one primarily *uses*, to something which is understood to provide immediate security (making low wages livable for those lucky enough to live in owned housing), future security (such as during imagined pension years), as well as functioning as a grounding and jumping-off point for imagining ones future in terms of

¹⁴ Critics of Saunders primarily take issue with his assessment that home ownership is a universal and ‘natural’ disposition where ownership inculcates more of a sense of security and emotional attachment than renting, as his case study at a very particular point in time in the UK. As the Yugoslav to Slovenian transition shows, social renting was preferred among Slovenians (Mandic & Clapham 1996), while ownership is not necessarily indicative of more “attachment.”

aspiration rather than *survival* (Appadurai 2013). While in established liberal democracies home ownership tends to be considered a commodity which is consumed, and from which capital can be cultivated and extracted (Ronald 2008), the meaning of ownership my interlocutors construct tends to focus on its role in providing permanency and security in (historically not-unrealistic) scenarios of extreme impoverishment and economic collapse. For both owners and non-owners, an owned home is constructed as a space away from the structural chaos of the public sphere, whether imagined as a peaceful family life, or a garden of sustenance.

However, as a testament to the importance of context and state-level policy in molding ideas of home and tenancy (Mandic & Clapham 1998; Dupuis & Thorns 1998; Ronald 2008), their visions of ownership are deeply shaped by the country they live in and experiences with life abroad. Thus, those who live abroad in “renter-society” Germany come to see ownership *in Serbia* as important, while acclimating to renting in their new country as their new norm.

This chapter begins with an overview of the contemporary housing situation of young adults in Serbia, showing how inheritance or family purchase is the primary route to independent housing today. I then move to the Yugoslav era to illustrate how Serbia became a country of “super-homeowners,” how housing class has transposed from the socialist period to the capitalist era via intergenerational wealth transfers, and why the idea of permanent tenancy became so vital to understanding home in the post-socialist context. Next, I look at how ownership and renting shape imagined futures abroad, with the former allowing young aspiring emigrants to consider their emigrations in terms of biographical self-fulfillment, and the latter framing emigration as an obligatory step towards the contemporary route to home ownership and the sense of security it provides. Finally, I conclude with some notes on the looming crisis of housing inequality in Belgrade specifically, and Serbia broadly, as the country fails to catch up to the growing group of young renters left out of inheritance prospects, while the ideological shift from housing as a right to housing as a commodity leaves their futures increasingly precarious.

TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD AND LATE HOME-LEAVING

Leaving the parental home and establishing independent housing is one of the key markers in youth's "transition to adulthood" in European countries (Molgat 2007). While the sequence of transitional events varies across the continent, autonomous housing is typically a predecessor to (or coincides with) partner co-habitation and family formation (Aassve, Arpino & Billari 2013), and is an important factor in gaining a sense of independence from the parental home under traditional life course transitions. However, the timing of when young people permanently leave the parental household varies widely across Europe (Mandic 2008). For example, in Scandinavian countries like Finland and Denmark, the majority of youth leave the parental household by age 22, while in Southern European countries like Greece, Spain, and Italy, over half of those over the age of 28 still live with their parents in (Iacovou 2002).

The post-socialist European countries, increasingly similar in life course transitional regimes to South European nations (Walther 2006; Kovacheva 2001), also indicate later attainment of independent housing (Tomanović & Stanojević 2015) compared to Western European countries. In Serbia, 67% of young adults aged 20-24 and 49.9% of those aged 25-29 still lived with their parents in 2015 (*ibid.*, pg. 24)¹⁵. Only 9.2% of youth rented or purchased an apartment alone or with a partner, while 8.4% inherited a house or flat, 7.1% had one purchased by their parents, and 5% rented with someone else paying the costs (*ibid.*). This indicates that inheritance and family purchase are the most common ways among youth to gain independent housing in Serbia, while familial support endures even when young adults leave the parental household. The majority of Serbian youth living with their parents state that they would like to live independently, but do not have the financial means to do so (Milić & Zhou 2015).

¹⁵ In a separate 2018/2019 study, 72% of those aged 18 to 27 lived with their parents, with 40% reporting that they would prefer to live alone but could not due to financial reasons (Lavrić, Tomanović & Jusić 2019).

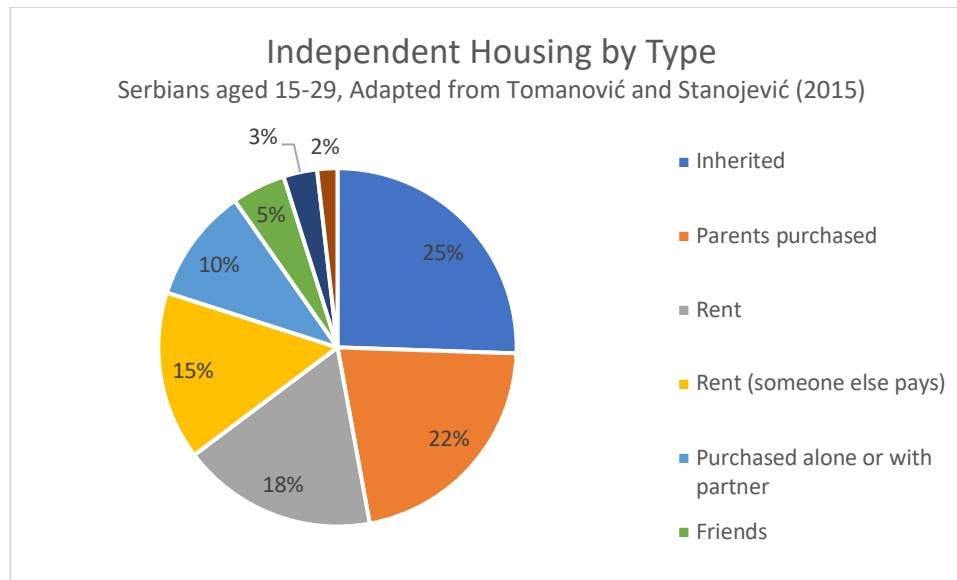


Figure 2. Independent Housing by Type Among Serbians aged 15-29.

SOCIALIST TO CAPITALIST MODE OF HOUSING

While there is no published systematic data on the age youth established independent housing under the Yugoslav system, or what percentage of youth continued to live in the parental household by age, extrapolating from the broader European post-socialist sphere we see the percentage of youth ages 16-34 living with parents has risen significantly from 2005 to 2012 (Gökşen et al. 2016), and is particularly pronounced in Slovakia where nearly 89% of non-student youth lived with their parents in 2012. Although some of this rise in parental home residence in Eastern Europe could be attributed to the 2008 recession, the transition from socialist-era housing policies to privatization and lack of development in alternative housing policies is a major factor in why youth continue living with their parents in the Western Balkans.

While the Yugoslav government faced difficulties with housing shortages and unequal distribution throughout its existence (Simmie 1991; Archer 2016), socialist housing policy expanded access to independent housing for millions in urban centers and smaller cities across the former Yugoslav republics (Le Normand 2014). The first wave of social housing in SFRY developed in the nationalization of some private homes (often through re-segmenting larger homes into smaller multi-unit dwellings), alongside multi-unit building

projects shortly after World War 2. These apartments were primarily reserved for “socially valuable citizens,” which at first translated to high-ranking Partisan war veterans and Communist party members. By the late 1960s, a second wave of social housing developed, this time through self-managed work organizations, where places of employment also served the function of developing and managing housing for their workers. This wave of building resulted in the large “blok”-style apartments in cities like Belgrade and Sarajevo, canonical of socialist-era architecture. A third, and most prominent form of housing outside of the city centers, was self-building (Le Normand 2014). Though discouraged in the Soviet sphere (Zavisca 2012), private building was tolerated in Yugoslavia due to the inability of the government to meet housing demand (Le Normand 2014). With little oversight and long bureaucratic processes, self-built housing could be accomplished over time. Although it was supposed to be in partnership with state workers, self-building was typically done with the help of friends and family (Archer 2016). Nevertheless, there were multiple established routes to gaining housing for young people and families in the Yugoslav era, along with laws limiting private accumulation of housing (e.g. one could not own more than two private homes) alongside campaigns to push those with social housing to give it up if they had a privately-owned home (Archer 2013).

HOUSING CLASS

As noted, the distribution of social housing was always unequal in Yugoslavia. Education and qualifications ranked higher on the list of points given to workers towards the housing queue, privileging those who were educated and in higher-skilled positions – shaping housing into a mechanism of social control to assist in bolstering Yugoslavia’s modernization project. Workers in management positions were often given larger apartments and line-cutting on the waiting lists was common (Archer 2016). As one of my participants, Aleksa, lamented,

“My dad, an upper level manager in a large shopping chain in Yugoslavia, rejected the apartment he was set to receive. Being a good communist, he said, ‘I only have two children, and they can live happily in the home I already [privately] own.

Someone else should take the apartment.’ Of course, that apartment just went to some other upper manager who already had a private home and fudged his ownership by re-signing his private home to a family member, so it’s not like it helped someone. I could have a nice apartment now!”

Like in other post-socialist countries (Zavisca 2012; Szelényi 1983) housing class – that is, a class built not on relations to production, but relations to property ownership for the purpose of housing (Chen et al. 2018) – is relevant here, as those with housing tenure had significantly lessened economic hardships than those without. With relatively capped earnings and low income inequality compared to Western nations, housing in Yugoslavia became a distinguishing marker of class. Use-right to social housing was preferred to privately owned property, as it could both serve as a marker of class distinction (Mandič 2010), while being cheaper to maintain as building repairs were the responsibility of the housing organization. Although social housing could not be sold, as it was socially owned property (*društvena svojina*), it could be traded on the rare occasion that someone wanted to move: for example, my grandmother lived in an apartment in the center of Sarajevo which she and my grandfather received due to his position in the Yugoslav Army. When she decided to relocate back to her hometown, she was able to trade the Sarajevo apartment for an equally-sized apartment in her small town – one which, when placed into the realm of commodity, has less value (a smaller city, less demand for housing, thus smaller resale value under market conditions), but by pure use-value, it is an apartment deemed sufficient for one person and thus had equal value in SFRY. Further, both private and social housing could be transferred to children (in the case of social housing, transferring use-right), thus solidifying housing class reproduction across generations (Zavisca 2012) outside of labor position and income earned, which continues to this day in the private sector.

USE-VALUE TO COMMODITY

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, social housing was rapidly privatized across the newly formed nations. People who lived in social housing across post-socialist Europe, whether organized by the state or their employer, could purchase their apartment

at a relatively low market rate, at times dubbed “give-away privatization” (Lux & Sunega 2014). This was especially so in Serbia, where the wartime economic crisis and hyperinflation – which doubled prices every 2.3 days in 1993 – allowed residents to purchase their homes at irregularly low rates, often between a hundred and a couple of thousand Deutsche marks (Archer 2016). Like in other post-socialist East European countries, this privatization process caused a phenomenon of “super-home ownership” in post-Yugoslav states (Mandič 2010). Thus, in the 1990s, Serbia transitioned from a bricolage housing regime with a significant portion of social housing organized through Yugoslavia’s self-management model (Mandic & Clapham 1996), to a “homeowner society” (Ronald 2008), or perhaps a “super-homeowner” society. Today, rates of homeownership – that is, people living in a home they or their family own – in Serbia are at about 89% (Đorđević and Petronijević 2015), with the vast majority of homes owned outright without a mortgage. This is immensely high, especially when compared to 63.3% homeownership in the United States (OECD Affordable Housing Database 2018; note likewise that only 23.3% of US owner-occupied housing is owned outright), and only 43.7% percent in Germany (ibid.). Although the money from the privatization process was initially supposed to fund the building of further social housing, the inflation rates and well-below market value sales depleted this potential source of capital (Đokić, Gligorijević & Čolić-Damjanović 2015). Thus, when the burden of constructing social housing was officially transferred from workplaces to the state in the privatization process, the state had no money to keep building. Further, workers who had paid into employer-organized housing funds in anticipation of receiving housing lost both their contributions and their route to permanent tenancy (Vilenica 2017).

Lacking new construction in the social housing sector, and with employers released from the task of providing housing to their workers, the independent living options available to young adults that do not depend on familial support are to rent, or purchase at market value. In major cities like Belgrade, rents are high compared to wages. For example, an apartment in the wider center costs about 350 euros with utilities, while median monthly wages in the city are only 450 euros. Additionally, there is an overall shortage of housing in cities as youth migration for work and education towards urban centers continues, alongside the

expansion of tourist rental services such as Airbnb and Booking. Independently purchasing a home is also an unlikely route to autonomous living, as mortgages are nearly impossible to obtain for younger people. Only 10 percent of households are eligible for a loan in the Serbian mortgage market (Đorđević and Petronijević 2015), and I would venture to guess that the majority of those who are eligible for mortgages are already homeowners. The mortgage market is highly underdeveloped, and necessitates having worked for years in one firm to be able to get considered for a loan – a difficult task considering the high rate of layoffs in private businesses, unregistered employment among younger workers, and high unemployment rates – alongside often a 40% down-payment required for purchasing through a mortgage loan (ibid). Additionally, the Serbian mortgage market primarily functions in the Euro, as the Dinar currency is popularly¹⁶ considered highly unstable (Bjelić 2019), while wages are typically paid in dinars. Thus, borrowers are put at a risk of their wages falling due to economic turns (Vasovic 2019)¹⁷, while their mortgages remain fixed at a Euro price. Đorđević and Petronijević (2015) estimate that, as current policy stands, it could take up to 90 years for wages and home prices to reach an optimal rate in the country.

¹⁶ While Serbia still uses the Serbian Dinar, most major transactions (rent, mortgage, wages in the white-collar private sector) are fixed in Euros, or, less frequently, United States Dollars. So, for example, rent will be set at 300 euros, but usually paid in Dinars, and the cost fluctuates depending on the exchange rate. While the Dinar has been relatively stable in the last few years, the exchange rate still oscillates between 116 to 122 dinars per Euro, which can mean a much-needed 2000 or so dinars (or nearly two days wages at the minimum wage) is lost in rent depending on the month. This also results in frequent currency conversions over time, the costs of which are usually placed on the buyer at a percentage of the transaction, adding an additional burden onto the residents of Serbia. The effects of this can be seen in the physical landscape of Belgrade as well, where seemingly every corner is marked by an exchange office (compared to, say, Montenegro, which functions on the Euro currency officially and lacks exchanges even in major cities). Within the 2-block radius of my apartment, I can count 5 exchange offices off the top of my head. As Serbians generally do not trust the Dinar to stay stable, savings tend to be kept in Euros, and most banks offer dual Euro/Dinar accounts.

¹⁷ This arrangement of purchasing mortgages in a foreign currency resulted in an eviction crisis in Serbia which started in 2015. In the years previous to the Global Economic Crisis, many Europeans – especially those in Central and Eastern Europe – had taken out mortgages in the Swiss franc (Frum 2015). Switzerland historically offered lower interest rates than mortgages settled in Euros, at a low 1.5%. However, in 2015, the Euro-peg on the Swiss franc was eliminated, causing the franc to rise in value by 20%. Overnight, millions of mortgage owners saw their debt and monthly costs rise by 20%. For many Serbians, this was an impossible burden, resulting in hundreds of evictions for those trapped in a mortgage well beyond their means.

Considering the lack of social housing and unattainable mortgages, it makes sense that the most common way for young adults to live independently in Serbia is through inheritance or their families purchasing a dwelling for them (Tomanović & Stanojević 2015). Indeed, the vast majority of the young people I have met who live independently and do not rent have either inherited an apartment; were given an “extra” apartment by their parents; or (and most commonly among those whose families owned and lived in apartments in a city center) parents sell their high-value apartment in order to purchase two smaller ones in a more peripheral area of the city. As such, the majority of Serbians who entered the workforce after the post-socialist transition inherit their housing class situation from their parents.

However, even this seemingly stable dynamic of housing transfer between generations sits on a precarious foundation (cf. Zhu 2018 for an analysis of housing transfer in China). Let us say that a family owns one apartment in Belgrade. If they have two children, they might sell their apartment in a more central location, in order to buy two apartments which their two children can inherit. However, the next generation now has a lower-value apartment, which cannot be sold in order to gain another two. If the next generation has two children, they will compete for one apartment, and so on. This has already resulted in some children being removed from the inheritance process and thus having no prospects of independent housing through this established route, particularly among those living in less “traditional families” (e.g. where parents have more than 2 children, in blended families, and in the tenth of Serbian households who do not own their homes).

THE MEANINGS OF HOUSING

OUTRIGHT OWNERSHIP, NOT CREDIT

When I asked Đorđe whether his parents own their home, as basic demographic information I collected from everyone, he said, “They do now. For most of my life we rented, and then my parents got a credit to build onto my grandparents’ house. As of last year, it’s paid off, so now they own it. You know, I don’t consider credit to be ownership.”

Like Russians (Zavisca 2010), Serbians mostly consider only outright ownership as a home truly being their own. This is in part due to the fact that mortgage markets have never fully developed in Serbia, but also because of very specific relationships to housing that developed in the socialist era. Specifically, the idea of permanent tenancy through use-right (Hayden 1986), which was reinforced in the privatization process of social housing. I note this difference between Serbians and, say, Americans, to point out the specific case of what one's "own home" means to my participants. When I explain the American mortgage system being the primary form of ownership to my Serbian friends, they are often shocked. "So your parents don't *really* own their home?" they will say. A mortgage feels more like a burden than a blessing, something which can easily be ripped away from you. As a friend explained to me that her sibling and partner were moving out of their family home, she teared up considering the risks of the mortgage being taken out. "What if one of them loses their job? They're still stuck with that debt. They could lose everything," she said.

For Americans, it seems an owned home, that is, under a mortgage, is something which indicates a certain sense of autonomy, to be able to do whatever you want to a structure, or, as house-flipping has increased in popularity, is often seen as an investment. One can have "a starter home," for example, which seems odd in Serbia. For Serbians, an owned home means, instead, something which can never be taken away: it is yours, and whatever happens, you will have it¹⁸. Ownership of a home thus has a specific meaning: it is something which grounds you physically, as a location to live in and always be able to return to, but also economically against all possible state, market, and individual failures.

¹⁸ Of course, there are many instances in which a home can be taken away in Serbia today. Recent cases have involved the new restitutions law which allows those who have claim to a physical property, for example the descendants those who emigrated or fled during WW2, to have their property returned (return rather than repayment seems to have been the primary route, as the second privatization process – of state companies – was to fill the restitutions payments, but like the privatization of social housing, did not turn much profit). Homes that are set to be inherited by children, or occupied by the current owner, can also be leveraged against the owner's unpaid debts, even if those debts are a small fraction of what the apartment actually costs. However, most Serbians appear to continue to operate under socialist permanent tenancy ideas when they consider their homes, and these restitutions and debt collections have started a relatively popularly supported movement called *Krov Nad Glavom* (*Roof Over [One's] Head*) which protests against, and at times physically prevent, evictions.

As such, home for my participants in Belgrade is both the starting and end point of planning a future.

REPRODUCTIVE FUTURES

Much of my 2-hour conversation with Ana centered around home ownership, renting, and the difficulties of meeting this basic need. Ana rents an apartment with her partner in Belgrade, and has been renting for most of her adult life. Given her family economic situation, she is not expecting to inherit an apartment in the future. With no direct prospect of independent living, her future plans significantly oriented around having a permanent home, and she described that as the most important step towards building a future, which for her meant having children and eventually retiring.

I was renting an apartment, whether alone or with my sister or with friends, and while I was working in Belgrade, my whole pay would go to just the rent, paying bills, and eventually food costs. So, there was absolutely nothing left - that is, discretionary funds, if you know what that is - for traveling, recreation (*uživanje*), savings, thinking about the future. Even clothes, and some other small things — there was no option for that while I worked in Belgrade in a permanent job, because those were wages like 30, 40 thousand — was just too little. ... [400 euros is the average wage here], with which - I keep thinking about for the last few days – how are people surviving in Serbia with that wage. How.. especially if you don't have your own space (home), how do you function? How do people have children in Serbia? How do they plan their families?

Ana explains the difficulties of renting in Belgrade on the low wages people receive, noting that with the average wage, even with roommates, people are barely able to cover their basic costs. Here, Ana points out how having a home is intimately tied to planning all other aspects of life. “How... especially if you don't have your own space, how do you function? How do people have children in Serbia?” Ana sees family formation without a house as something that's impossible with the wages paid in Serbia, and, as we will see later, she

finds this first step of homeownership to be one that's impossible to reach without significant personal sacrifice.

Maja, on the other hand, lives in an apartment that her father owns. And so, she is able to imagine having a child, even with her current pay, though she admits it would be difficult.

If I were to have a child now as a single mother with this pay, we'd struggle. I mean, we could, but we'd struggle. But I think in some relatively near future I'll have some pay raises, so that way it would become easier, along with a partner who I assume will have earnings similar to mine, that we won't have problems.

Further, Maja's outlook on the financial feasibility to have a child in the future is relatively secure. She admits she would struggle financially if she were a single mother right now, but that it would not be impossible. In the future, however, she anticipates wage raises and a partner with similar earnings, with whom she could maintain financial stability. While Maja does not note this explicitly in the moment, her absence of discussion on housing, compared to Ana's centering of it when she discusses her family formation plans, means Maja can also depend on the apartment she received from her family when she imagines her future. Thus, housing is one significant aspect of economic survival in Serbia that Maja does not have to worry about.

Ana and Maja's discussions on family formation and the importance of housing thus also provides a caveat to the reproduction of housing class – not only does housing transfer reproduce housing classes and function as a transmission of generational wealth, it also affects *reproduction itself* by circumscribing the possibility of imagining having children with or without secure tenancy¹⁹.

IMPOSSIBILITY OF BUYING / RENTING AS LOSS

STRUCTURAL IMPOSSIBILITY?

¹⁹ Per Zavisca (2012), the relationship between housing and reproduction is neither unforeseen nor ignored by states. In contemporary Russia, mortgage and housing policy is intricately intertwined with the country's pro-natalist policy.

As noted, mortgages are nearly impossible to attain in the Serbian market, and only 10% of households are eligible to take out such a credit. Ana describes her plans, of what it would take to be able to not just buy an apartment, but possibly build a home:

Right now, my thoughts on [leaving] are divided. I don't have one plan. I'm divided between going abroad and staying here. In the sense that, if I stay here to find a job that's stable, I'll have to claw my way through it (*da se grabim*), which would take a minimum of 10 years. I was just talking with my boyfriend about how we could, for example, get to some of our own capital, that is, our own apartment. We calculated that it would take us at least 20 years to save up from 2 wages, to be able to have some kind of property together. Not even individually, but together, two people. And that, in taking that much money aside monthly to save up for building a house for example, that we'd lose all other benefits — that is, tied to life and leisure. [...] Which in Serbia would take us 20 years. We literally calculated how much of our pay we'd — if I have a pay of 50 thousand, he has a pay of 100 thousand [dinars, approximately 500 USD and 1000 USD per month respectively, or 1300 euros total], how many years it'll take us to build something. Or the other option is to take out a credit. Those are the two options in Serbia [laughs].

In her description, Ana notes many of the problems young people face in attempting to build themselves to the point of buying an apartment. The first is getting a job where she will be able to advance in position and in pay to be able to take out a credit or save something beyond her basic needs, which she describes as “clawing her way up.” If she were to take out a credit, this means staying in one company long enough that a creditor will trust that her earnings will be consistent, a nearly impossible task in a market where private businesses, especially in the service industry (Ana is in tourism and restaurant service by trade), open and close frequently. She estimates this at 10 years, if she is lucky. Calculating the amount of time it would take to save up to buy outright, she imagines 20 years of a life without any leisure, that is, without any sense of being “normal.”²⁰

²⁰ My participants often described a “normal” life in terms of an apartment, and the ability to at least go on vacation to the sea once a year. Essentially, the idea is that one is able to buy some modest things for

Tanja: Even that credit, — I was looking at apartments — for an apartment of 100 thousand euros, the credit is 700 [euros per month].

Ana: 30 years, 700 euros per month, nobody has that kind of pay in Serbia (*toliko čovek nema platu u Srbiji*).

Tanja: It's easier to rent...

Ana: I for example rented for a long time, and I realized that I'm just gifting my money to someone to be able to live there. That's ... I'm giving everything I earn from my pocket to invest to live in that apartment which isn't mine. Which in the end, after 10, 20, 30, 50 years, it still won't be mine. And I still won't have that security.

For Ana, renting does not provide the same sense of security that homeownership does as, she explains, she will not have that apartment after decades of renting. This is heavily tied to how she sees the unstable pensions in Serbia, which she describes below. However, beyond the basic problem of cost and investment that Ana describes, renting is heavily unregulated in Serbia. Landlords will often not register tenants in their apartments because they do not want to be responsible for a rental tax, leaving them with few rights when conflicts arise. Many landlords do not acknowledge the few rights tenants do have, such as no unannounced visits or entering the home without the tenant's permission. Đorđe, who moved to Belgrade for university studies, looked for an affordable apartment for nearly a year. In the meantime, he experienced landlords who entered his home at all hours and was threatened with physical force when he complained. He stayed on friends' couches while looking for new places, moving back and forth between his hometown and Belgrade. He eventually found a suitable flat, conceding to the landlord regularly overstaying his welcome because he was not as intrusive as others he had experienced.

My own experience renting in Belgrade has been similar; my partner and I rented from older landlords who insisted on coming over every two weeks to “pick up the bills,” that

pleasure without feeling like it is a significant economic burden. Jessica Greenberg has also documented this concept of normality (2011).

is, do an inspection on the apartment. They accused us of hosting “illegal immigrants” when we kept our bedroom door closed during their visit and decided that we have additional roommates because we had more than two toothbrushes. We moved temporarily to my partner’s parents’ home after being unable to reconcile our differences with the landlords, and embarked again on the search for a new place to live. On our last day, the landlords called in a panic (they called multiple times a day on a landline they insisted on us keeping), and eventually rushed over to our place. As we opened the door with all of our things half-packed and in a mess, they looked relieved: they had convinced themselves that we were going to steal all of their furniture. Their fear, however extreme, was also not completely unreasonable. Another result of the undeveloped renting culture in Serbia also means that landlords have little enforceable legal recourse against tenants if their property is destroyed or stolen (as apartments typically come fully furnished). This fear, however, seems intensified by tabloids publishing “horror stories” about renters taking advantage of their landlords.

Jelena, however, has become accustomed to the idea of renting in Serbia, after having lived in Germany for a few months. However, she says that before she lived abroad, she used to think about her lack of an apartment in Serbia as a barrier to moving. She thought she would be risking much more by going abroad than a homeowner, as she would not have a place to return to if her life abroad turned awry. Jelena processes this in a conversation with her (past) self:

Tanja: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Jelena: Now I’m looking more at the moment, but I haven’t given up completely on going abroad [...] I still see myself outside of these borders. Maybe go over there a little bit, a little here. In short, nothing is keeping me here. My parents have passed away, I guess I have my brother, I have some friends who are okay, but I also see that I’d help them in some other way. I don’t know. I don’t dissuade myself in that way anymore. Before it was like, “when I go, I can’t come back,” and I see I think even about that differently now. ... “Oh, but you don’t have your own apartment” (*Jao, kao, nemaš svoj stan*). I rent. So what? How do people live in the

entire world? I met some people in Berlin, they've been renting for 20, 30 years - their kids are grown. Why would I take out a credit?

When Jelena realized that people in other countries rent for their whole lives, she began to think about her relationship to housing and emigrating differently. While she initially considered ownership as a hedge against uncertainty, as many people in poorer countries do, her view changed to accommodate a more Western perspective of accepting this renting as a reasonable risk – especially when considered against the risk of credit. Olivia and Uroš affirm Jelena's stance on housing in Germany, where the majority of people rent. Uroš and his partner moved to Germany after years of preparation in Belgrade. For him, it was the constraint of renting and paying for the costs of living that made it impossible to live in Serbia: "One of our wages of two went to just the apartment and bills. I mean, we lived as renters, so that's 200 or 250 for the apartment, up to 500 euros with bills. With the same amount of energy invested, we got less than we could in another country." Despite their above-average wages (at least when Uroš was not laid off), this problem of making ends meet for him and his wife was compounded by the fact that they had to pay for private daycare as all the state-run facilities were full. Per Zavisca's (2010) findings in Russia, income does not appear to correlate with home ownership in Serbia either. In Germany, despite his earning a minimum wage, Uroš felt that he could live a "decent" life with their two incomes and would eventually be able to move forward to work in his calling.

As Olivia proudly showed me around her rented apartment in southern Germany, she told me about her "third child," the soup-maker/blender/everything-mixer in one. Her home looks like a photo out of the IKEA catalogue, with bright sunlight cascading in onto white fluffy pillows and combination play areas and work areas. All that is missing is her happy husband and children, who were at work and school. When she mentioned that they own a home in a different city, I asked her why they do not sell that one and buy a home in the city they live in. "I think people in Serbia like to have their own apartment and live in that apartment. And like, you don't think about rent and you're the lord of your own castle. Here, with taxes, it's more sensical to not live in your own apartment." In Germany, tenant protections are far more powerful than in Serbia, likely owing to the fact that nearly 60% of Germans are renters (OECD Affordable Housing Database 2018). For Olivia, the home

she lives in is not central to fulfilling the sense of security others in my research crave (though owning a home elsewhere surely satisfies that to an extent). Instead, Olivia has learned to be a renter in Germany, and to simultaneously treat a house as capital which can one day be converted into a pension. So, what exactly does a home mean to my participants in Belgrade?

HOME AS A SHELTER/SANCTUARY: A NORMAL LIFE

The concepts of house and home have been described variously in the literature (Mallett 2004), from spaces which provide ontological security (Giddens 2013), to refuges or havens resulting from industrialization-era divisions of the public and private sphere (Wardhaugh 1999; Mallett 2004). While there is debate on the conflation of a physical dwelling and the concept of home in the West, I argue that ownership is central to the idea of home in Serbia. For Ana and Maja, the idea of a private home provides a shelter from the outside world. For Ana, this shelter takes shape in a garden which provides the food she would need in imagined total economic deprivation, such as when she considers her pension years.

For me, [registered working years, (*radni staž*)] is presenting itself as something that I didn't start working on from the beginning. From the beginning I had this vision - this experience - of grown (*odrasli*) people who were, to say, tricked (*zeznuti*) from the side of the state because it's disorganized, really unregulated (*neuređeno, jako je nesređeno*). ... And so, why did you work your whole life? ... those are people who dedicated 20, 30 years of their lives in work. That's 8 hours daily, 9, 10, 12 - depends on who, invested in that work to live better tomorrow, to be able to have a family, which is for everyone, I think, the primary thing in life. ... You worked your whole life to get to that point of enjoying it, and now you can't enjoy it because you have a pension of 15, 20 thousand.

Now, my vision - that is, my vision for that peaceful, normal life - is to secure some kind of house that will have a big yard/garden. Because I've noticed that, for

example my grandma who's 88 years old, and she lives off of her garden. And she prepares *zimnice* (jarred vegetables), in the winter she lives off of her *zimnice*, she has a — she actually has nothing, no animals, nothing but her garden. And she's figuring it out for meat, and everything else she has from herself. And she can, for example, live off of that pension of 20 thousand, even if it's never good enough. ... So yeah, that's how I see it - even if I worked here and I worked abroad, if I could get a house with a garden, that would be my peace. Whatever happens on the planet, I'll be able to plant my own things and live off of that.

Ana again points to the home as a sense of security, using her grandmother's garden as a way to explain how one can survive on their own without having to think about her lack of registered work that would secure even a minimal pension. Based on her distrust of the system she lives in, gleaned from the experiences of older people she knows who were "tricked" (or an alternative translation could be "screwed over") by the pension system, she takes an almost survivalist view of her long-term future. This future is one where she does not have to depend on insecure state institutions to consider her life past her working age, instead opting to grow her own food in a possibly apocalyptic landscape of insecurity. In this idea of a home of her own with a garden, she imagines independence from state institutions and global economies as a form of "peace." A home with a garden provides Ana ontological security in that she can be truly independent, as she has always thought of herself.

For Maja, ontological security is also achieved through the home, but this idea of home is less about survival, and more about producing the ideal family she strives for, against a disorganized world she sees around her. If Ana's garden is an Eden of sustenance, Maja's is a private sanctuary from the chaotic public sphere (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). When I asked her what she wants in the future for herself, she responded:

For me it's really important to be useful. I don't need to be super successful, to be really important in my surroundings, not like that the news take pictures of me and goes "this economist is really important." I think in the sense that people in my career field have positive feelings about me and that they think I am a good leader

in it, that I picked my professional field well. But really I would like to be useful, that is really important to me. To be giving more than I'm just paid for. In some way, I think that's important to make sense of my life. In some ways my sense/understanding of life revolves around that - to do something, leave something better than before I got there. In my job, I'd like to go in that direction.

And, that my own home is clean, peaceful - that my family is in some ways living in harmony - that there aren't large conflicts - like a divorce. I think I would experience that as a sort of failure. Not that I would stay in a relationship just to not have to divorce, but that that should be a healthy relationship; a successful relationship with happy children.

Maja's version of home is a sanctuary away from the chaos - both interpersonal dynamics and state "disorganization" - she sees around her in everyday life: a sheltered life for her children, and a peaceful family. In constructing this imagined sanctuary, she builds a "moral wall" (Pugh 2015) between the private sphere of pragmatic duty to her family (where she prioritizes providing stability for her hypothetical children, including seeing divorce as a personal failure) and the messy life that is the state and labor relationships. Like Ana, Maja uses the term "peace" as something she strives for in her future, for what a "normal life" (*normalni život*) means. For both women, "peace" appears to mean a life free of unpredictability, symbolizing a "normal economy" and its corresponding social relations (i.e. the family). Thus, the home is not so much a *means* to a normal life, but a creation of its idealized form in the private sphere when it is absent in the public sphere.

ON LEAVING

LEAVING TO BUY A HOME

Thus far, we have seen Ana's need to buy a home to achieve a sense of peace – whether immediate, or, mostly, in her pension years. However, she struggles on how to accomplish that. Indeed, Ana is an already-existing example of how the transmission of intergenerational wealth through housing will inevitably leave more and more young

people without this route to independent living. Although her family has historically owned property in Belgrade, its partitioning, re-selling, and re-purchasing in order to accommodate her extended family over the last two generations has left her and her sister without a prospect of inheritance. Ana's option, apart from the impossibility of saving or taking out credit, is to work abroad:

Going abroad brings its own [benefits]. My thinking is, if that's some kind of work that for example 4, 5, 6 to 10 years, with that, in that moment that we decide - again I'm speaking of my boyfriend and myself - that we go abroad to earn. That is still throwing away your life for 5 to 10 years. There's no moment where we're going to enjoy life (*da uživamo*) and work, but that we're going abroad for 10 years to work for the thing that would take us 30 years in Serbia to achieve. And then for those 10 years, we're like mice in a hole [laughs] so that we can make something. So, I'm still not sure which option I'll chose, and how that'll function. That'll come up in a few months, that decision. There's also the option to open a private business in Serbia, again on credit. That, in the chance that that business succeeds, it can be fantastic. But, at the same time, 80 percent of private businesses in Serbia fail. In that sense, the statistics are going against us.

As Ana describes, her imagined life abroad is one of sacrifice, not of leisure. It is not an idealized world where she will live in an "orderly country" (*uređena zemlja*), as many of my participants hope for – this does not interest her, as her ideal life takes place in Belgrade. Instead, she imagines working abroad for five to ten years, to save as much as she can, so she can achieve her garden away from economic insecurity. This is the only scenario she does not appear to describe as "the statistics going against" her, but it is a scenario where she does not imagine she will live a fulfilling life for a lengthy period of time, losing her prime years to be able to secure a future peaceful existence in her older age.

In Germany, Srđan has already undertaken the "mice in a hole" route to stability. After his entire family was laid off due to "redundancy" from the factory which sustained their small town in Western Serbia, he ventured to Germany to work in construction in order to support his wife, children, and parents. He explained that he first, like many of my other

interviewees in Germany, lived in housing arranged by his boss, sharing a room with four other men. Like Ana, Srđan at first had no strong intention of staying abroad. His decision to leave came as a spur of the moment offer to earn some money. However, Srđan paid off his house in Serbia (which he purchased on credit) the year before our interview. Then, he saved enough for the deposit, first, and last month's rent for a small apartment, and brought his wife to help him earn income while sending remittances to their parents and children. His next plan is to bring their children over as well. Though he spends much time attempting to replicate his social relationships in Serbia in Germany, he nevertheless now sees his future in Germany, "unless something changes there" (in Serbia) which he does not believe it will. As Zhan (2015) has argued in the case of Chinese rural-to-urban migrants' aspirations to own a home elsewhere, the work put towards the dream of homeownership in the place of origin may actually result in an intensification of being "in-between," as economic success in migrants' destination cities tightly incorporates them into the metropolis's production regimes. For Ana, like for Srđan and his many counterpart Yugoslav guest workers since the 1970s, the goal of moving abroad in order to save to buy a home can thus translate to staying abroad permanently as well.

LEAVING BECAUSE YOU ALREADY HAVE A HOME

For Maja, the decision to leave is different. It is one of unfulfilled potential, of constantly questioning whether she took the path of least resistance if she stays. As she describes:

As I said until now, my life here is more or less great. I don't have any existential problems, I have money to be able to travel, I have a lot of support from my parents in the sense that I don't have to pay for an apartment - I live in my dad's apartment - and so my expenses are much lower [than for other people]. I'm in love, I have friends, I found my place in this city.

Maja, like other young people I interviewed who live in a family-owned apartment, overall enjoys her life in Belgrade. She acknowledges that one significant hardship she does not have to endure is paying rent, a significant expense for any young adult living

independently. Instead, like her similarly positioned counterparts, she sees other problems within the system that make it difficult to imagine a future in Serbia. Maja, like Ana, she worries about her future children growing up in Serbia with state institutions she sees as “falling apart.” However, she also leans on a discourse of exceptional achievement and the normalization of mobility to understand her own biography and decisions about emigration:

The other thing that is a factor for wanting to leave is that this is the 21st century, nobody is tied down in some way. So, why should I be? And if we speak really frankly, when we think of some strong average - I think in the end I am more capable, energetic - that’s the reason I do so many things on an everyday basis because I think I have a wish to give more energy than the average person. And so I don’t think I should be happy with average accomplishments. And so sitting here seems easy, I think it’s - like the path of least resistance. Here it’s great for me, so why should I go? And so I ask myself frequently, “am I choosing the easier or the nicer option?”

Ana, Jelena, and Maja all hooked into a global discourse of mobility to describe idealized modern cosmopolitan citizens. This means seeing new things, putting yourself into new situations, and enjoying your own life against the traditional structures of past eras. However, when Maja asks “am I choosing the easier option or the nicer option?” her question is the opposite of Ana’s. Ana’s easier option is to leave, so she can hope to return - Maja’s is to stay, but at the risk of not living a life where she feels she has fulfilled her existential need to contribute to something bigger than herself. While Maja’s secure public sector job may be a significant portion of what makes staying the easier option, I would argue that her stable and independent housing is the lynchpin that secures her existence in Belgrade and provides her with the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013), whether she ultimately decides to leave or stay.

SOCIALIST HOUSING AND CONTEMPORARY HOUSING REGIMES: THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED STABILITY OF HOMEOWNERS AND THE NEW HOUSING CLASS

The differences between Maja and Ana's experiences²¹ in housing tenure and outlook show the increasing material disparity developing in Serbia.²² By having secured stable housing through her family, Maja can paradoxically critique the social housing system which directly benefitted her through intergenerational housing transfer.

Maja: I was recently on a business case, and people give literally socialist resolutions — when they present a resolution to the company.

Tanja: Like what?

Maja: We're supposed give a proposal of how to attract more talent for hiring in that company. And they said, well the company could buy me a house, and I'd have to work in that company for 25 years, and in fact I'm basically paying off that house for 25 years. And then when I die, the house goes back into the company's ownership. And then a new worker goes there. That's total socialism, that has nothing to do with free trade, my view on my career. Now I'm supposed to be tied to somewhere, sitting there for 25 years, what's the house for in the end?

Maja had worked on a project for analyzing employee retention. She described an idea presented by a young focus group member, that the company could provide employees housing in exchange for working for them for 25 years, as a “socialist” resolution. Indeed,

²¹ Maja and Ana have also reversed roles from what I have generally heard to be the experience of my friends in Belgrade. Typically, young people who move to Belgrade from rural towns and smaller cities experience what Ana does - lack of inheritance prospects in the city, inability to establish stable residency in Belgrade, and difficulty paying rent while earning average (or even above average) wages – much like Uroš and Đorđe, described above. Those who grew up in Belgrade have better prospects of attaining permanent independent housing, as their parents will often sell a centrally located large apartment in order to buy multiple smaller apartments further away from the center.

²² At the time that I interviewed Maja, I had admittedly not thought too much about housing yet. At first, I took for granted her statement of her apartment providing stability, as others had similarly discussed living in family-provided apartments or with their parents. A later interview with a man in a similar labor position (white-collar state job) illuminated this difference – he too had moved from rural Serbia and, despite making similar wages to Maja, was barely making ends meet with having to pay rent.

it does hark back to socialist era housing in Yugoslavia, where apartments were allotted to employees by companies (rather than the state directly) and paid for by an income tax on all employees. The capitalist twist, of course, is the lack of immediate housing tenure²³ established in this scenario - that one could lose that apartment if they lost their job, making this example more akin to housing in a company town in the United Kingdom or United States. However, even this scenario would ease the burden on Serbia's youth, who generally have no viable prospects for owning their own homes, other than those lucky enough to inherit them²⁴. For someone like Ana, who has no prospects of inheritance, it would circumvent the anxieties and material impossibility of finding secure long-term domestic employment in order to be able to establish creditworthiness, of saving up for an enormous down-payment, and ultimately the secondary effects she describes of not having guaranteed housing: her capacity to consider starting a family.

Maja's family apartment thus secures her materially to be able to consider the important question of whether she will find fulfillment in her career. Although Maja herself is cognizant of the inequalities of tenancy, the era of super-homeownership broadly creates an invisibility of this increasing material gap, where those who have independent housing prospects rarely need to consider that some people may never have the same due to the astronomical costs of housing in the city, both for rent and purchase.

Ana, whose family seems to have never benefitted from social housing in Belgrade, instead expresses nostalgia for a different aspect of housing in the former Yugoslavia: self-building. She describes how her grandparents attained their home:

²³ Housing made up about a quarter of legal disputes in Yugoslav labor courts in the 1980s (Hayden 1986). Robert Hayden (personal correspondence, July 2019) recounted a somewhat comical scenario regarding the right to a dwelling upon establishing residency in SFRY: a university professor had waited for an apartment for years, and when it was finally ready, a cleaner had come to prepare it for the professor's move. However, the cleaner moved her belongings and family into the apartment, and by establishing residency, she established her permanent right to live in the apartment. By law, the cleaner was allowed to keep the apartment, effectively circumventing the unequal system of social housing distribution which prioritized educated elites.

²⁴ Perhaps more optimistic than an employer providing housing, however, was the focus group participant's idea that an employer would provide a 25-year labor contract.

From the other side, I remember how my grandma talked, from dad's side, how she and her husband built everything by hand. He'd go to work, she'd go to work, and then from that pay they bought mortar. And then, next pay they bought the bricks, next pay they buy the roof. They built it together, but they could live from paycheck to paycheck and build. And that was the goal. I can't really compare it because it was a really long time ago, and I only know it from stories, how much is that comparable to today. But my grandma was a cook, I don't think she had a huge pay. Grandpa, I don't know what he did, he died young. He worked probably in some form of commercial trade (*trgovina*). So, it was a different time. People say that they lived nicely in the time of Tito. [laughing] Relaxed and without stress. Everything today is... [she trails off].

Although lower-level workers faced difficulties receiving credit to build housing, or were given smaller credits than upper management (Archer 2016), Ana nevertheless reflects on this family history positively compared to her generation's current situation. However, while Ana's grandparents were able to build their house "brick by brick," at least in her memory, increasing regulations make even this less desirable route to homeownership very unlikely for Belgrade's young. Instead, self-building in contemporary Serbia is no longer the domain of individuals, but of private speculators who are often politically connected and offer to build cheap housing to unsuspecting buyers. Some of this building never comes to fruition, and life savings are lost in a matter of months.

As housing moves further from the realm of rights to the realm of capital resource, property in Belgrade is set to increase in cost for both potential owners and renters. New developments such as the Belgrade Waterfront are already creating this dynamic by bulldozing existing neighborhoods and developing housing that only the extremely wealthy, foreigners, and return diaspora are able to afford. As are Airbnb rentals, which circumvent the economic precarity of Belgrade's renters in preference of short-term visitors, along with Serbia's extensive diaspora who often leave their apartments sitting empty, typically waiting for their own retirements, save for a yearly 2-week trip to the city.

CONCLUSIONS

My participants illustrate the importance given to housing after the “shock treatment” that post-socialist Serbia received in its transition to a capitalist economy. Their experiences show how the unequal distribution of housing in the socialist era created new class positions for their families and are being reproduced in their own generation. These class positions are not built on relationships to production (as my participants’ incomes do not coincide with home ownership), but relationships to individual or family property ownership²⁵. Interestingly, two participants explicitly explained their shifting family class background in terms of housing, with Aleksa explaining, “in the socialist era, we were upper middle class. By that, I mean we were expanding – getting new houses. Now, we’re lower middle class, we’re just maintaining what we have.”

These positions of housing class significantly shape how my participants view their futures. While they all see the future in Serbia as somewhat “blocked,” they show different inflections on what a blocked future individually means. For Maja, her future is consistent with an idealized form of the “choice biography” (discussed in Chapter 1) where her relative economic security forms the basis for being able to ask questions like “am I choosing the easier option?” if she stays in Serbia. Maja’s problems with Serbia are not with meeting her personal economic needs, but disappointment and fear based in navigating healthcare, education, and other state institutions. For Ana, conversely, the question of moving is not one of individual fulfillment, but of establishing long-term housing security after she is unable to continue working. This was also the case for Uroš, whose family left in hopes of giving their children a more secure economic future despite wanting to live in Belgrade. For Uroš, Olivia, and Jelena, all of whom have spent time in

²⁵ However, it is important to note the caveat that, while labor-based class does not seem to matter as much as housing class in Serbia with regard to uncertainty, it surely does as my participants venture abroad. While Ana and Srđan work as guest workers earning minimum wages in order to achieve financial security in Serbia, someone like Olivia, whose family is securely in Germany’s professional class, is able to develop capital in Germany well beyond the average guest worker’s minimum wage existence. Likewise, this relationship of housing class in Serbia does not mean that many homeowners are not living in desperately poor material conditions, but simply that owned housing lessens one very core aspect of precarity across income scales.

Germany, their understanding of homeownership has shifted – security is no longer about owning a home in their lives abroad (real or imagined), though they recognize that home ownership *in Serbia* is seen as important.

In their subjective understandings of home, my participants also show a turn inward: of building a sanctuary which shields them from the outside world marked by economic and social insecurity and instability, particularly with the retrenchments of labor protections and social welfare which are no longer deemed a right, but a privilege. While this turn to the home as sanctuary may be an outgrowth of the bourgeois separation of the public and private spheres (Mallett 2004), it seems a better explanation would be rooted in a socialist-era right to housing tenure and its effect on how one understands where to “invest” in uncertain times. This historical legacy presumes that a home cannot be taken away, and thus affirms the home’s centrality as a resource to maintain against all other forms of capital. However, with new restitution and debt collection laws, alongside the dwindling capacity to gain new homes across generations, this, too, is becoming less of a guarantee.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT CHILDREN? FAMILY FORMATION AND THE “WHITE PLAGUE”

“I, as president of the republic, elected with the largest support in contemporary Serbian history, have the right to warn the people of the catastrophic effects of the reality that we do not have children, and that we do not have a future.”

– Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, 17 March 2018

With high emigration and low birth rates, Serbia’s government – like much of the rest of the European post-socialist sphere (Tóth 2018; Billingsley & Duntava 2017; Hašková 2007) – has begun to fear an impending “depopulation” crisis. Although the majority of this dissertation deals with aspirations towards emigration due to work, housing, or youth simply not ‘seeing a future’ for themselves in the country, in this chapter I turn to Serbia’s recent pronatalist policies to understand a government response, and everyday people’s processing of it, to another “future”: its children, or lack thereof.

Serbia’s low birth rate has been a significant source of debate in news outlets over the last decade, becoming more prominent with each passing year I have been in the field. Particularly when reporting on rural areas, but also more generally, low natality has been unofficially dubbed the “white plague” (*bela kuga*), inciting images of mass population “death.” However, unlike a bacterial or viral disease, the “white plague” is constructed not as causing individual deaths, but as a looming *national* demise by governments and newspapers, with young adults – particularly women – at the epicenter of the “disease.”

Tying the country's national future to natality (Yuval-Davis 1997; Brown & Ferree 2005), Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced²⁶ in March 2018 that, “If we don't process this theme [natality] immediately and address it in another way, we are going to lose this country. We don't have a right to do that. It is our obligation to care for the fatherland in the future. The Chinese worry 1000 years into the future. Let us worry about the next 50 years; [in our imaginations] live the life of our children, the life of our grandchildren. To think about them, whether we are leaving them a fatherland, a country, or not.” Using language such as “fatherland” in an attempt to incite a nationalist-coded patriotism,²⁷ he pleaded with Serbians to have more children in order to support the country's greying population, noting that, in 20 years, those potential children will be needed to work and pay into pension funds.

This announcement was paired with the introduction of Serbia's 2018 “Law on Financial Support for Families with Children,” which at first sight expanded the state benefits provided for children and mothers, in the form of cash benefits for the former and maternity leave for the latter. Centering the role of women in the battle against depopulation, Vučić said, “Yesterday the government brought a serious strategy for dealing with the disappearance of our population. We will have serious measures through which we will help, most importantly, mothers.” In his proposal, he aimed to both protect mothers in the workforce, while providing financial benefits for parents with children. However, to hypothetical “other” women and critics, he charged, “Write statements, engage in feminist movements, this and that movements... [In regard to natality] everyone from Angela Merkel, to Denmark, Sweden, Norway is working on it. [...] Only we are not doing anything, because we are too *selfish* to see what the future holds.” Despite using “we”

²⁶ *Blic*, Lana Gedošević /*Tanjug*: “VUČIĆ: Za prvo dete 100.000, za drugo dete 10.000 mesečno dve godine, za treće dete 12.000 mesečno u toku 10 GODINA, a za četvrto dete 18.000 EVRA” 17 March 2018.

²⁷ Fatherland refers to a national character for a country, and thus is typically considered a nationalistically oriented term for a state in Serbian. Underscoring the nationalist tones of the press conference, Vučić couched the plea for births in Serbia's ongoing conflict with Kosovo (Johnson 2019b), whose population is primarily Kosovar Albanians. Speaking within the borders of Serbia, he discussed that only Bujanovac – which has a majority ethnic Albanian population – had a positive net birth rate and that ethnic Albanians have “no problems” with reproduction. The state's concern, feminist critics note, is not that Serbian citizens are not having children, but that *ethnic Serbs* are not (cf. Gligorijević 2018).

language in calling Serbians selfish, the President's intertwining of motherhood and natalism, and "criticism" to feminist movements, essentially blames women for the country's depopulation problem.

This is perhaps why, though it was not reported in many of the news stories about the press conference, he likewise suggested that abortion policy in Serbia should shift to the "Macedonian model" by requiring women to listen to the fetus's heartbeat before they can proceed with abortion. Feminists criticized the president for the proposed policy, noting that not only did it not reduce abortion rates in Macedonia, and has since been abandoned, but that – as Serbia allows abortions freely for only the first 10 weeks of pregnancy – there would be no heartbeat to be heard (Gligorijević 2018). He continued, "Nobody is going to take anyone's rights away. We only want to try to ask [*zamolimo*] people to think about how important children are to our Serbia, and nothing more." Thus, instead of proposing a policy that would have any "effect," the president's words served to threaten the rights of Serbian women and center them in the fault for the country's "white plague." Women who have abortions or practice other forms of reproductive choice or timing, once portrayed as "rational" actors under anti-natalist policies which swept the globe under modernity, were suddenly remade irrational and selfish as it is not *their personal* future which they should be considering, but the *nation's* (Krause 2001). Like in other contexts where pronatalist rhetoric is tied to a national question (Shiffman, Skrabalo & Subotic 2002; Rivkin-Fish 2010; Williams 2014), Serbian policy appears on the track to expand women's access to resources when it comes to those which assist in fertility, while retracting rights to resources which prevent or delay it, such as abortion.

Alongside mobilizing long-standing tropes blaming women for their "selfishness," or "hedonism" (Tomanović, Stanojević, and Ljubičić 2016), especially popular among the Serbian Orthodox Church, Vučić drew on a number of discourses to hail young Serbians to reproduce. Brown and Ferree (2005) identify four media frames in pronatalist news reporting in the United Kingdom: begging, lecturing, threatening, and bribing. *Begging* entails a "negative framing of the population in crisis ... connected to a positively framed appeal to rise to the occasion and have children for the nation" (13) which stresses the "joys of procreation." *Lecturing* "assumes that the childless have a duty to reproduce that they

are failing to perform for some individual reason, typically diagnosed as selfishness, irresponsibility, or psychological dysfunction” (13). *Threatening* frames reproduction “as natural and essential; failing to reproduce is presented as threatening to both individual well-being and social stability,” often using scare tactics, for example, around delaying childbearing with stories of infertile women who waited until it’s “too late” (14). Lastly, *bribing* claims “rest on the assumption that the desire to have children is natural or essential to womanhood [while] the existence of structural barriers ... prevent women from following their natural inclinations” (16). Alongside using the frame of *lecturing* Serbians (women) for their selfishness and *threatening* and *begging* for a future with children by stating that, “To be a parent is the biggest joy and most important role in the world. You can see that from the people who are fighting, who are fighting with such power and might, to have a child, but have natural problems with that,” Vučić’s announcement also used *bribing* by pointing to a structural deficit through introducing new state-level policies which would provide cash benefits, supposedly support the rights of workers who are mothers, and overhaul Serbia’s preschools to address the deficit of available spots in state schools for young children.

Had the President *only* stuck to the “bribing” frame by introducing structural changes (Brown & Ferree 2005), his announcement likely would not have generated nearly as negative a response among the public²⁸. Indeed, Serbia’s pronatalist policies can be construed as quite generous to parents and hopeful parents by those hailing from liberal welfare states like the United Kingdom and United States. For example, in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment in Serbia is free for the first three attempts²⁹. By law (though

²⁸ The statement managed to upset a broad political spectrum in the country. On the right wing, xenophobic sentiments reigned in the response to the announcement. The absurd combination of the press conference being on both Kosovo and natality convinced some Serbians that Vučić is attempting to build support for the eventual recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state; mentions of settling migrants in order to help with the natality problem in Serbia upset those with strong anti-immigrant sentiments; while the proposed benefits for larger numbers of children (3 or 4) made commenters joke that only Romani families would be getting “rich.” On the left, feminists were concerned about the anti-abortion rhetoric couched in “protecting mothers” from “unauthorized clinics,” while the majority of commenters critiqued the general call to have more children by pointing out their low wages and lack of opportunities.

²⁹ Zakon o finansijskoj podršci porodici sa decom/Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, 2018. Compare this to an average out-of-pocket cost in the United States of around \$19,000 US dollars (Gurevich 2020).

often not necessarily in practice), working women are entitled to nearly a year of maternity leave for their first and second child, and two years for their third child³⁰. The newest family support law further entitles parents to a 1) one-off payment of 100,000 dinars for a first child (about 850 euros), 2) 10,000 dinars per month for 24 months for a second child, 3) 12,000 dinars per month for 10 years for a third child, and 4) a total of 18,000 euros over the course of 10 years for a fourth child, thus attempting to “reward” parents who give birth to more children (Tóth 2018) in efforts to increase the average number of children a woman bears over her lifetime from around 1.46 to the “ideal” of 2.1 (Keyfitz 1986).

Like his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, Vučić recognized in his speech that raising children is an unequal burden placed on mothers which puts them in a precarious position in the labor force, and thus “aimed to improve women’s status by promoting their roles as defined by the state’s needs” (Rivkin-Fish 2010:702). However, even this state-level support falls short of addressing the concerns of young Serbians who desire children (or at least are not opposed to having them) yet are nevertheless postponing reproduction. In this chapter, I bring into conversation my interlocutors who desire or have children, Serbia’s ongoing pronatalist policies and campaigns, and the comments from news readers which respond to them. While sociological and anthropological studies have a rich tradition of studying of pronatalist population policies as a reintroduction of the state into the private sphere, thus illuminating contemporary reconfigurations of family and gender at the nexus of state power (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Williams 2014; Gal & Kligman 2000), I look at how Serbians discursively resist these state policies by viewing them as a deep misrecognition of their culturally-situated understandings of family formation. In doing so, I elucidate the barriers young Serbians see to reproduction by showing their plans for what must happen *before* having children, the lives they desire for their kids, and how they process this mismatch of pressure to form normative families with the individual material realities they foresee. I begin with a theoretical introduction which historically roots the normative expectations of parenthood and the role of children in Yugoslav society, to illuminate

³⁰ Zakon o finansijskoj podršci porodici sa decom/Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, 2018.

contextually-specific the role of “sacrifice” that Serbians anticipate in parenthood which shapes their responses to the state-level pronatalist push.

TRANSITIONING TO PARENTHOOD IN SERBIA

Brannen & Nilsen (2002) proposed three ideal-types of perspectives on life course transition and temporality regarding young peoples’ perspectives on the future: 1) deferment, where adulthood is considered as a far-away future and protracted youth is something to be savored in self-fulfillment, 2) adaptability, where adulthood is thought of as a risk-taking venture and at times a welcome challenge, and 3) predictability, where adulthood is assumed to come at the same chartered course of parents’ traditional trajectories of education, work, and family formation. In Brannen and Nilsen’s work, the young people (around age 20) seemed to take comfort that adulthood was far away and generally saw an optimistic future, while the present itself was not necessarily wholly burdensome. The young Serbians I interviewed and spent time with, admittedly mostly older than their study participants, seem to fall into none of these categories. The present they experienced was largely precarious, and they worried that the future did not look different from that precarity. In this sense, their conceptualization of the future was quite like Nowotny’s (1994) “extended present,” where the future is no longer thought of through a lens of “progress,” and difficult to grasp as anything but the present they inhabit. They desired standardized trajectories, that is, predictability, yet saw them as unattainable within the societal structure they were born into. They practiced deferment, but not as a strategy of enjoying the present, yet as a status they were doomed to with no other choices for “forward movement” available to them and few other options than to adapt to this “new normal.” This “extended present,” marked by precarity and uncertainty, weighs heavily on young Serbians who are not necessarily opposed to having children, but do not see the means to do so.

Waiting for the means to have children – meaning material security, as understood through established permanent employment and individually-owned housing – is also couched

within normative frameworks of the roles of parents and children in the post-Yugoslav context. The two primary framings of these roles are the sacredness of the child (Erdei 2013) and the self-sacrifice of parents for their children (Ćeriman 2019; Tomanović et al. 2016).

THE “IDEOLOGY OF THE HAPPY CHILD”

The sacred position of children particularly flourished in the post-World War II socialist period. As the Yugoslav Partisans struggled against Axis powers in the 1940s, children were recruited as early Young Pioneers and acted in service of the war effort by performing tasks ranging from gathering food and clothing for Partisan soldiers, to military duties such as snatching weapons from German soldiers, guarding villages, and carrying out small diversions (Erdei 2013:159). Those who were orphaned by the war joined Partisan ranks, and some went on to become “pioneer-national heroes” who would become “role models for the post-war generation” (ibid.) After the war, “leading party officials, including Tito himself, used every opportunity to refer not just to the war years but to the prewar period as well as a time of ‘childhood deprivation’ or ‘no childhood at all.’ (ibid:160). Tito, addressing the Pioneers who traditionally visited on his birthday, said,

“My childhood, like the childhood of my friends and of the great majority of children, was full of suffering and pain, filled with disappointments, because we couldn’t achieve what we wanted to... Because of that, all of us who have had such a childhood now have a duty to care for the youngest—to create a pleasant childhood for you, since we did not have one.” (ibid.:160)

As such, children were used as a political tool to critique the interwar government, while socialist Yugoslavia promised children a true “childhood,” implemented through the increased role of the state in childrearing through education and youth organizations. Such child-centered organizations included the Pioneers, and, for older youth, Youth Work Actions (*Omladinske radne akcije*) which combined a low-cost rebuilding of the nation’s

infrastructure with vocational training and a sort of “holiday” atmosphere.³¹ Children were the center of national celebrations, featured most prominently in the May 25th celebration of Marshall Tito’s birthday, which came to be known as Youth Day. Youth Day featured a cross-country relay race where self-managed companies and unions would design relay sticks which represented their work as gifts for Tito, and Pioneer children would relay them to Belgrade, culminating in a nationwide spectacle. As in government-level discourse today, children were understood as the future of the nation. In the shifting Yugoslav ideological context, children were to be the seeds of an ideological investment into the future-driven utopian vision of the party (156), alongside being the country’s future socialist workers and citizens. The Pioneer slogan was, “For the country with Tito — to the future!” (ibid.: 162), and in later years, the organization was reformed from a rigid and overtly ideological program to one which combined ideology and “children’s joy,” through festivals, extracurriculars, picnics, recreational centers such as Belgrade’s Pioneer City, and summer camps. After Yugoslavia’s 1948 break with Stalin, despite basing its Pioneers program on Lenin’s Pioneers, the country used the reformed Pioneers’ “ideology of the happy child” as a way to distinguish itself from the USSR as well (ibid.:170). Thus, the child-centered ideology of Yugoslavia served as a nation-building device which could be reformulated as ideological shifts took place over the course of the socialist period, and, importantly, which would delineate its utopian vision as both unlike the pre-war capitalist regime *and* unlike its former communist allies.

Over the course of the Yugoslav period, children likewise gained more extensive rights, from rights to education, to state-administered financial benefits (Simic & Simic 2019). As

³¹ In 2018, I interviewed a group of people who had participated in the Youth Work Actions to understand youth civic participation during the Yugoslav era, which I see as diminished in contemporary Serbia. They spoke of 60s and 70s participation as a combination of leisure and opportunity to meet other young people from across the Yugoslav republics, which included concerts by popular Yugoslav bands such as Bijelo Dugme. They noted that in the later stages of the program, such as the 1980s, Youth Work Actions shifted in class composition, from largely communist “middle class” families, to working class children who used it as an opportunity to have a vacation. By this decade, as Milica Bakić-Hayden (personal correspondence, April 2020) noted to me, there was already a loosening of the ideology of “brotherhood and unity,” and feeling of Yugoslavia as one solidified country, which motivated earlier generations to participate in such projects. Per my interlocutors, dissatisfaction with the organization arose in the 1980s, as young people began to find themselves as a cheap labor source, no longer in the service of the state and glorified effort of reconstruction after WWII, but increasingly in service of private businesses.

modernized socialist women, Yugoslav mothers were to dually occupy the role of workers and carers, while the state attempted to lessen the weight of this double burden (Molyneux 1995; Hochschild 2003) with paid maternity leave from work and childcare leave in recognition of care work as work (Simic & Simic 2019). However, the “ideology of the happy child,” the constant focus on children as the future of Yugoslavia, combined with a significant proportion of families functioning as intergenerational households or care networks to fill in the “gaps” of the socialist system (ibid.; see also Mishtal 2009 for similar familial care work in Poland, and Solari 2019 for Ukraine), upheld a parallel ideology of parenthood as “self-sacrifice” which would solidify in 1990s Serbia (Ćeriman 2019)³². As Serbians in the 1990s faced mass impoverishment due to international sanctions, and the ongoing economic consequences of the Milošević government’s wars with newly-independent Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo, parents took the role of “sacrificing” through channeling all available resources to their children (Tomanović 2010). Accordingly, in 2001, Serbians across age groups overwhelmingly agreed that the “parents’ duty is to do their best for their children even at the expense of their own well-being” (World Values Survey 2000-2004).³³ This narrative of sacrificial parenthood persists (Tomanović et al. 2016) as Serbia has transitioned from a universalistic to a familial (ibid.; Mojić 2016) model of the welfare state, where young people are increasingly dependent on their families as a social safety net throughout their extended transitions to adulthood. While their parents’ generation was supported by standardized

³² However, this sense of sacrifice is also a bi-directional relationship, and one which predates the 1990s. While parents are supposed to sacrifice for children, the assumption is that children will likewise sacrifice for their parents when they are older by providing care work and often cohabitating with them. Though this is not the subject of this chapter, it may also provide another “piece of the puzzle” as to why young people are not having children in anticipation of also having to sacrifice for their parents – as pointed to by my interlocutors’ many references to pensioners as a unifying “tragic” group affected by the post-socialist crisis in describing their own fears of old age. This creates a catch-22 of sorts, as many young people likewise have concerns that they will not have someone to take care of *them* if they do not reproduce. Along with underscoring the above as a mutual relationship of sacrifice, Milica Bakić-Hayden pointed out to me that 1990s migration created a discontinuity of this custom, where children’s role as sacrificing shifted to sending remittances, while sacrifice on the part of parents manifested as a parting with and longing for their children. For an insightful piece on how these international relationships take shape between adult immigrants and their elderly mothers, see Bajic-Hajdukovic (2013).

³³ 81% of Serbian respondents agreed with this, with the alternate choice being “Parents have a life of their own and should not be asked to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their children.” Surprisingly, 85% of US respondents likewise agreed that parents should sacrifice at the expense of their own well-being, while only 66% of Swedish respondents and 64% of Chinese respondents did.

transitions from education to employment, worker-friendly labor laws, and support for women workers as mothers, young Serbians are left with a shell of these levels of state protection.

As such, Serbian parents fulfill the role of “sacrificing” well beyond the legal age of adulthood for their children, often taking on the role of what Allison Pugh would call “commitment heroes” (Pugh 2015). Particularly as mothers suffered the economic consequences of the 1990s and 2000s, disproportionately losing their positions as workers, the role of “duty” in motherhood became especially powerful (Ćeriman 2019). In providing for their children, and now precariously-positioned adult children, the Serbian self-sacrificing parent³⁴, like Pugh’s “commitment hero,” finds that “‘surrendering’ is not a last resort, but instead no resort at all” (ibid: 127).

Thus, although parenthood persists as a normative and desirable goal to be achieved on the route to adulthood (Ćeriman 2019; Tomanović et al. 2016; Lavrič, Tomanović & Jusić 2019), I argue that the discourse of parental sacrifice combined with the precarious economic positions of young Serbians makes the idea of having children (and especially three or more children, as the Serbian government’s pronatalist policy encourages) seem an impossible feat for the majority of Serbians. Rather than displaying a value reorientation towards individualistic prioritization of self-fulfillment over reproduction, understood as a significant factor in fertility decline in Western contexts (Ćeriman 2019) – and transposed to Serbia through state accusations of “selfish” Serbians – I argue that normative understandings family instead make Serbians see parenthood as such a vital and enduring role that they are reluctant to believe they are able to sufficiently inhabit it within their meager economic means.

³⁴ Like Pugh’s equivalence of duty to the “Giving Tree” story, where the tree gives everything of itself to a small boy, to the point of finally becoming only a stump (which the boy can later rest on, making the tree happy even in its greatly reduced form) (2015:132), parenting journalists and psychologists in Serbia have critiqued this “sacrificing” parent model as something which variously either makes children “too dependent” (Milivojević 2014) or destroys the lives of mothers who push themselves to “sacrifice” as a moral obligation even when it is unnecessary (Laketić n.d.). The discourse of “sacrifice,” however, likely takes many practices and ranges from behaviors which could be considered needlessly self-destructive, to those which prioritize the needs of children in everyday life yet vary depending on the material resources of a family.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN FIRST: ABOVE-AVERAGE WAGES, A PERMANENT CONTRACT, AND
A HOME

Ana loves children. Alongside her extensive resume in hospitality, she has worked in Belgrade's many playrooms [*dečije igraonice*] where Belgradians hold their children's birthday parties and other group activities, and as a nanny during her many stints of work abroad. Throughout our interview, she told me the most important thing to her, "and to everyone, surely," is to eventually have children. Of her long-term goals and relationship with her boyfriend, she said, "we're working together, to make something together, to start a family - because family to me is still the first most important thing." This "making something together" entailed saving, likely through working abroad, in order to buy a home which would ensure their material stability (see Chapter 2). However, age 27 at the time of our interview, she could not name an age where she thought having a child would be feasible. As Ana and I discussed her plans to have children, she first began by listing the things she currently *does not have*: her finished university degree, which she was working on, and a stable job, which according to her can only come after years of working her way up with an employer.

Tanja: Do you think about those things [having a family] for yourself?

Ana: Yeah, every day.

Tanja: Do you think you'll be able to?

Ana: Hmm... I don't know. I'm not sure. Because I spent a long time abroad, this is my first time that I'm spending more time here in Serbia. And because I'm finishing university, I'm not currently employed. I can't think about making a family until I'm done with university and find a job. My vision, my understanding, is that when I finish university that I can find a job and basically get the same pay that I've had before — the starting wage would be 30 thousand, 40, 50 thousand, until I get to some higher position. And then even if I get to a higher position, those wages here are 70, 100 thousand dinars, and so on. And the fact that I have a lot of

experience working abroad - even in America - and abroad in Greece - that's to me unreal that people live like that. But I've been living like that here for some time [laughs] and it's unbelievable!

Like other young Serbians, Ana believes that children can only come after following a certain trajectory of completing her education, working towards a permanent position, and establishing independent rent-free housing (she does not mention marriage, but is currently cohabitating with her partner). While these other markers of “adulthood” appear to have shifted in their linear aspect in Serbia – like the ‘yo-yo’ trajectories witnessed in other countries (EGRIS 2001) – the formation of family largely persists as a goal which should only be attained after those markers are achieved. Ana’s life is a testament to this shifting *initial* trajectory, having unconventionally started working at age 15 while finishing secondary school, beginning university and then stopping in order to work abroad, and eventually returning in hopes of finishing her education and, ideally, establishing a life in Serbia. Nevertheless, she could not see herself having a child before her education was completed, a stable job for her and her partner was established, and ideally an owned house.

As Ana began listing the things which need to happen for her to create a family, however, she sort of became “lost” in considering the wages which she’ll have to earn and how long it will take to get to that point, the delay she had from working abroad and the discrepancy in the standard of living she had between Serbia and elsewhere, and eventually, the apartment she cannot hope to own in the meantime without working abroad again. Only an hour later did she remember that we had started this conversation by discussing children! In this pattern of speaking, she metaphorically experiences that which many young Serbians seem to in their delayed desires for achieving family formation: losing sight of their goal in the prolonged transition of what needs to happen first.

Although Serbia has had a series of pronatalist campaigns from the 1990s onward³⁵, the 2018 campaign generated renewed media interest in discussing parenthood. Journalist Ivan

³⁵ These pronatalist campaigns range from the late 1990s during the Milošević era (Shiffman et al. 2002) through the 2000 and 2010s, most notably the “2008 Strategy to Increase Births” and the proclamation by then-President Boris Tadić of 2012 as “the year of babies” (Tanjug 2012). The most recent “2017 Strategy

Radisavljević, writing in November 2018 for the magazine *Oblakoder*, opened a feature article by discussing his own hesitations about having children in light of recent pressure from his family, “I thought that some basic minimum for raising a child is a permanent, well-paid job for both parents, that the young family has their own apartment, as well as human qualities and every possible asset of a parent of a newborn. When it comes to me, I can barely put half a check mark next to one of those bullet points on the list, and I noticed that there are not many of my friends who are more or less my age who are not in the same situation. There’s rarely a situation where someone has accomplished more than one whole bullet point.” Radisavljević then interviewed 7 people in their twenties to ask what they think about having children in Serbia in 2018. Like Ana, they expected to one day have children – the majority stating that they would like to do so before age 30 – but qualified that goal with the material conditions they would need to achieve if they were to even think about having them. In this section, I analyze their responses as a representation of popular youth discourse regarding parenthood and family formation.³⁶

Most pointed to an owned apartment and a permanent job with above-average wages as the minimum for considering a family, such as Ljubinka,³⁷ age 25, who said, “the financial minimum for a child is a secure job, thus a secure income that goes beyond the minimum wage, a secured housing situation, preferably with no credit obligations.” While Jovana, 23, said that “we have a negative population increase because people, as a rule, do not earn enough to be able to afford a child. There is no sense of security, and instead young people work on temporary contracts and often for minimum wage. Because of that, I can’t plan anything, much less a family,” Sofija, age 26, conceded that despite feeling the minimum is an apartment and above-average earnings, “I believe I would sacrifice myself [*žrtvovala*

to Increase Births” is the newest such iteration, which resulted in the 2018 pronatalist measures and new law on family support.

³⁶ *Oblakoder* is a Belgrade magazine aimed at young urban adults, run by young independent journalists. It covers lifestyle, alternative pop culture and music scenes, and some aspects of politics, and is akin to something like an independent local *Vice* magazine. In this sense, I take it as an ethnographic artifact of youth culture in the city, while this article serves as a form of public representation of youth discourse. The original article can be accessed here: <https://www.oblakoder.org.rs/potomstvo-u-dvadesetim-zelite-li-da-imate-decu/>

³⁷ Radisavljević anonymized his interviewees’ names, noting the sensitive nature of the topic. I use his original pseudonyms. The quotes were published in Serbian, and the English translations are my own.

bih se], if that minimum doesn't exist, because what happens if we never get to some kind of ideal conditions? [...] I think the minimum which is needed for families to really support their children and themselves, is looked at as a luxury.”

Jovana's statement that she “can't plan anything, much less a family,” hits at the heart of the general material uncertainty in Serbia which makes family formation an overwhelming risk. For her, the future is an “extended present” (Nowotny 1994) which cannot be planned and appears not as progressively better, but simply as a prolongation of her and her cohorts' current economic situation. While all the other young adults used the register of sacrifice [*žrtvovanje*] to understand what they would do *if* they had a child, Sofija is unique among Radisavljević's interviewees in using the register to say that she would eventually have a child *despite* these uncertain conditions, because security may never come. In doing so, she elaborates that the “minimum” material conditions young people feel the need for to have children are actually “looked at as a luxury” in contemporary Serbia, pointing to the overall impoverishment of the population across the class spectrum (barring, possibly, the wealthiest elites).

The interviewees' use of achievement of material minimums and register of sacrifice illustrate normative understandings of family formation and parenthood in Serbia. First, they all presumed a dual-income household which is understood as the new “traditional” ideal family form in the country³⁸ (Tomanović et al. 2016) in part due to the legacy of the Yugoslav government's, as well as the current government's, maternity leave and population policies which sought to ingrain the subjectivities of women as both worker and mother (Simic & Simic 2019; Shiffman et al. 2002). While in the 1990s and 2000s there was an aspect of “repatriarchialization” in that women were more likely to suffer from job loss due to economic crisis and become primarily homemakers (Ćeriman 2019; Vilenica 2013), and in that women continue to suffer from employment discrimination today and are thus more likely to be formally unemployed (Farnsworth et al. 2019), the normative

³⁸ Except possibly by the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose Patriarch Irinej has been much-criticized in the news for statements such as “women are obligated to reproduce for the nation” (Anon. 2017a; Anon. 2017b) without regard to their labor status. I would describe this family form as radical or orthodox traditionalism, as most Serbians do not see this as either an ideal or a reality across generations (Tomanović 2016).

position for women is nevertheless as dually mothers and workers. This family formation in Serbia is called a *modified male breadwinner model*, “which assumes the ideal of full employment for women and men, but also great asymmetry in the private sphere and balancing work and family life” (Tomanović et al. 2016:192, my translation).

Second, material minimums to be achieved before family formation, alongside pointing to aspects of what is considered a “normal life” in the post-socialist Balkans (Greenberg 2011), likewise show that families are normatively understood as *something to be planned*. Indeed, unlike many Eastern European socialist countries³⁹, Yugoslavia primarily approached reproduction and natalism in terms of “family planning,” dually understood as providing access to abortion and modern contraceptives on one side, while underlining the role of mothers-as-workers and workers-as-mothers through child benefits, paid maternity, paid childcare leave, as well as the (however uneven) proliferation of early childcare centers which would allow mothers to return to work (Simic & Simic 2019). One caveat I would include would be that, while the material aspect of secure work was something to be achieved before family formation in Yugoslavia in order to gain maternity benefits, independent housing was not something which was a prerequisite in the socialist era. Instead, under the Yugoslav social housing distribution system, families with children were prioritized while single adults almost never received an apartment (Archer 2016). Thus, a lack of independent housing may have actually encouraged childbearing in the Yugoslav context (see Chapter 2). As in contemporary Russia (Zavisca 2012), the Serbian state has recognized this connection of housing and natality in recent small-scale efforts to reintroduce social housing for new parents after a decades-long stoppage of any social housing construction.

Finally, the material prerequisites and discourse of sacrifice tell us much about the envisioned role of children and parents in Serbia. Planned and unplanned parenthood has

³⁹ For example, Romania, under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu, banned abortions completely in an attempt to raise birth rates (Dumbrava 2017), which resulted in the country’s infamous overfilled orphanages and the proliferation of international adoption regimes. Yugoslavia, instead, was concerned about high birth rates in poorer parts of the county, and accompanying high infant mortality rates (Simic & Simic 2019), leading the country to adopt both contraceptive measures and family support measures to bolster child health.

been greatly moralized, especially in countries which have discursively situated family planning at the nexus of responsibility, “good motherhood,” and deservingness of state support, such as the United States (Hawkes 1995; McClain 1996; Park 2011)⁴⁰. This moralization is likewise the case in Serbia, hinging on constructions of what parents are obligated to be able to provide for their children (Park 2011), especially in the context of the impoverished post-socialist situation. Of planning and prerequisites, Jovana (immediately before the quote above) said,

A lot of people have kids sort of recreationally, with the logic that if their grandmas could do it, so can they. That results in a specific amount of children whose parents barely take care of them or simply don’t know what to do with them.

In this statement, Jovana says that an *unplanned* family, one made “recreationally” without regard to temporal arrangements or economic stability, is essentially immoral; that if one cannot provide basic needs, through a combination of income, assets, and social benefits, they should not consider children. As Serbians are not necessarily opposed to receipt of government assistance⁴¹, the discourse of parental irresponsibility is not rooted in being a “public charge” (Park 2011), but a combination of distrust in the state and employers conflicting with the perceived duty of parents to raise a “happy child.” Like in the United States (Zelizer 2013), Yugoslavia (and subsequently, Serbia) experienced a shift in the meaning of children throughout the last two centuries, moving them from the role of economic actors and laborers within the household, towards a “priceless” part of the family which should be nurtured. As noted above, this cultural shift was especially evident in Partisan campaigns after World War II, which mobilized child-centered language as a

⁴⁰ In the US, these discourses of responsibility and deservingness are heavily racialized. This is sometimes also the case in Serbia, as Roma people (who have higher birth rates) are often discussed as having children to “get state benefits” – for example in the live public commentary on the presidential address discussed above – throwing away all normative critiques regarding the meager benefits actually available via the state, often under an assumption that Roma people are somehow getting “more” benefits than ethnic Serbs. This topic deserves mention, but a deeper analysis is outside of the scope of this paper. In this section, I instead read discussions of planning as a classed discourse which is likewise popular in media, such as Vokjo V’s song, “Kako to?”

⁴¹ Simic & Simic (2019) write that child benefits in Yugoslavia were “a significant source of income for many families, reaching 25 percent of income for the [sic] working class families of four and 18 percent for office workers’ families of the same size in the 1950s.”

promise of a utopian socialist future where “childhood exists” after massive wartime deprivation (Erdei 2013), where any measure should be taken on the part of the state and adults to secure such a childhood. In Serbia, the rhetoric of “sacrifice” [*žrtvovanje*] on the part of the parent prevails as an understanding of parent/child roles today (Tomanović et al. 2016). At its essence, self-sacrifice is understood to mean taking any means necessary to ensure the well-being of your child, while the child is thought of as the most important part of the family unit. As Radoš (22) said, “I would be ready to sacrifice myself for a child, but in as much as I see that I’m not capable to secure for a child all that is needed for him, that is, minimum needs, I wouldn’t become a parent.” Thus, self-sacrifice first requires planning by ensuring the basic conditions for one to sacrifice themselves.

Self-sacrifice on the part of parents is an intergenerational phenomenon (Tomanović et al. 2016). Serbian grandparents often fulfill the role of alloparents, in that they are expected to help with childcare for grandchildren to ease the conflict between work and parenthood (Simic & Simic 2019). This is seen by young parents as an expectation, with Tomanović and co-authors noting of their young parent participants that,

"All young fathers and mothers receive help from their parents. At the same time, they all feel they have a right to that help. Their expectation falls on a script - a sort of norm regarding parenthood as a heroic sacrifice. This reason is not negotiable: it is rather a settled rule that as children they have the right to the help and support of their parents. It should also be noted that young parents similarly normatively portray their parenting: they sacrifice for their children because they consider it to be their parental duty." (2016:164, my translation)

Accordingly, we can also say that parenthood or parental duty for most Serbians does not stop when their child reaches legal adulthood, but is a process that continues throughout their lifetime. As the Serbian welfare state turned from the universalistic model towards the familial model, where extended families provide the majority of social support and safety nets (Mojčić 2016), this is even more-so the case. Thus, when young Serbians imagine parenthood, they are not simply imagining coping through the financial and emotional burdens of early childhood and teenage years; instead, they see parenthood through what

they can provide to their children in a much longer term, as they see their parents currently doing for them.

This also explains why, for example, a case that made headlines in the United States which applauded a New York family for evicting their 30-year-old son who refused to get a job, was met with shock by some older Serbians. As one commenter said, “Shame! [...] It’s more important to them to watch TV in peace and quiet than to know their child has somewhere to sleep. And what did they get from it? One more empty room in their huge house ... here, parents beg their children to visit them more often and to stay and live with them in as much as they have the conditions for that. I can’t believe this.” Other commenters joked, “looks like he’s one of ours,” and, “he should move to Serbia with his parents. Here he can live with them as long as he wants.” Of course, many were also critical of young Serbians, noting that maybe the same should happen to them, in order to push “lazy children” to start working and becoming independent.⁴² Others, like Radisavljević’s interviewees discussing childrearing, pointed out that work and living standards are higher in the West, and that the two groups of young adults cannot be compared.

Đorđe, one of my interlocutors, took account of his social group and he said that most of his friends, ranging in age from teenagers to their forties, do not have kids. He felt particularly injured by a comment from his cousin who lives abroad, who was badgering him about having children:

It’s likely that some of them don’t want to have kids, others would like to but can’t. I mean, that’s that: economics. You don’t have enough for yourself, how are you supposed to have a child? When it’s born, to live in poverty — I mean, like not having basic things. That’s largely why people don’t have kids.

That’s what people from abroad don’t understand. I remember one of my cousins being like — he lived in America and worked there — he was like, “when are you going to have kids?” That was about a year and a half ago, I was 27. Like, brother,

⁴² The article can be found here: <http://rs.n1info.com/Lifestyle/a390490/Roditelj-tuzili-sina-jer-nece-da-se-iseli-iz-njihove-kuce.html>

I don't have enough for myself, what kids? He was like, "well, you can always figure it out for kids." It's easy for you to talk about that from your position. We're not in the same financial position. It can't work like that.

At age 27, Đorđe was struggling to finish his University degree. He had largely worked in low-wage temporary positions throughout his life but was unemployed and struggling to figure out whether he could stay in Belgrade when he spoke to his cousin. Đorđe critiques the ubiquitous pressure to have a child⁴³ – epitomized in the conversation with his cousin – and the dismissive statement, "you can always figure it out for kids." Comparing his and his cousin's vastly disparate economic situations, he says, like many responding to the Balkans' enormous diaspora's opinions, "it's easy for you to talk." While Serbians believe they will, by the "sacrifice" frame of parenting, indeed "figure it out for their kids" *if* they find themselves in the situation, they refuse to put their hypothetical children in a position of suffering in the first place.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA GAFF OF "GIVE BIRTH, DON'T DELAY!"

["*RADAJ, NE ODGAĐAJ!*"]

The sentiment that one can "always figure it out" for children was the undertone of a short-lived pronatalist slogan campaign in February 2018, which hailed Serbians to reproduce with the imperative rhyme, "*Give birth, don't delay!*" ["*Radaaj, ne odgađaj!*"]. The phrase was chosen as the first prize for a national contest which asked citizens to come up with slogans that would promote the forthcoming pronatalist population politics in the country (Anon. 2018). However, the press release was not paired with the financial assistance which would be announced the following month. People in comments seemed livid. "*Is this Njuz* [Serbian satirical newspaper] *or real news? Our state politics is slogan*

⁴³ Living here as a woman in my late 20s and early 30s, I have forgotten the number of times I have been told to have children (and thereby discount my own uncertain economic situation, or any personal hesitation) by various acquaintances and even landlords. My friends and acquaintances attest to this pressure from their parents and others as well, often wondering, "how could I possibly have children now?" The refrain "you can always figure it out for kids" is certainly not unique to Đorđe's cousin.

selection?” one comment questioned. One hundred and ninety-two comments responded to just one article alone, most of them poking fun at the slogan or angrily responding in capital letters.

One commenter pointed to the seemingly-frequent delays in disbursing financial support for mothers: “*PAY, don’t delay! You’re late 3 months with payments for maternity leave, that’s how much we’re a priority to you, government. Shame!*” This type of comment was likewise prevalent in March, when the expanded financial benefits were announced. This points to the fact that Serbians do not trust social measures of the state to function in the long term, as their experiences with bureaucratic offices attest to an inevitability of dysfunction (as I discuss in Chapter 4).

Another woman, responding to the phrase through the indignity of being unemployed or layoffs which ensue for many women when they get pregnant (Farnsworth et al. 2019), charged,

Women want to give birth, but how, when they don’t have a job, or if they do, they get fired as soon as they become pregnant. Do you know what kind of humiliation and degradation this is to women as beings, and more so if they’re educated. You are denying us our right to work and dignity if we give birth, forcing us to hang on to the humpbacks of our families and husbands. You’re humiliating us in a million ways, hypocrites, and then shoving it in our faces that we don’t want children. We’re having children, but abroad.

Another two commenters discussed life abroad as a solution to this insulting slogan campaign,

For example – “Good wages, for your dads” [*dobre plate, za vaše tate*], or “Delivery assured, every day secured, [*porođaj siguran, bezbedan svaki dan*], or “Maternity paid, so the child is not thrown away” [*trudničko plaćeno, da dete ne bude bačeno*]? Honestly, my biggest wish is to run away from here, do you have some kind of slogan against that.

--

How do you not understand, the white plague isn't ruling here in the sense that there is a bigger mortality compared to natality, people are running away from this fryer without a future, from my ten friends at minimum 6 have left this country, and all who I know an iota feel the same way...

A man with one child explained why Serbians, even if they do have one child and desire more, often stop after the first (which is one of the primary reasons the pronatalist policy is targeting the most assistance towards people with three or more children, even joining with businesses for a discount card for families with more than three children, which reads "You are our heroes!"):

My wage is 30,000 [...] my wife gets maternity for 26,000 [...], we have one 9-month-old child for whom just for food and diapers we spend almost 100 euros, meaning 12,000 [dinars], the electricity is 6,000 a month, tv/internet 2400, our telephones together around 2,000, every month some expense for about 5000 (car registration, fuel...) which means that approximately just with my wage I can't cover the basic needs of our child and the obligations for our house, if we consider that about 5-6 thousand of my wage goes to paying for transport to work and food that I eat. When I calculate everything above and take it out, we are left with 20.000 for food, God forbid for medicine if it's needed, for clothes for us and our child, hygienic supplies for three, plus for kindergarten when our child reaches their first year and my wife goes back to work, which costs between 6 to 9 thousand. Is it possible to function normally with that? Before I got married I always thought something like a minimum of three kids, but now that I have one, I'm really scared about what will happen when the time comes to think about another child... You are pitiful, country of mine...

Another discussed their low wages, and turned to the position of children in the future, noting that they don't want to "birth martyrs" [*mučenike*]:

Why not [give birth], with 25,000 dinars a month. This country deserves to empty itself completely because it is rotten through with sickness, and a million people

don't have their own place here. There will only be fewer of us. I don't want to birth martyrs (*mučenike*).

Ivona, one of my interlocutors, discussed the state-level push for higher birth rates in the country, and explained that it is not happening because people do not see a future for themselves,

People don't have control over their own lives. You can't plan anything, you can't start anything. That's why people don't have kids. That's like why — people are saying, “women don't want to have kids.” These women on Twitter said, “with who? How?” How, when it's not possible to have kids here? [...] If there's anything natural in life, it's having kids. But that isn't happening here.

[Everywhere else] it's normal to have 4, 5 kids. I mean, in Europe, 1 or 2. But everywhere outside of Europe people have 4 or 5. Here, we have 1, and even if that, if it happens. People have dogs and cats, but they don't want kids. Why? Because it's impossible.

Most of the comments on the slogan campaign, along with Ivona's, pointed to some level of structurally-imposed “abnormality” felt in Serbia (Greenberg 2011), which prevents people from having children even if reproduction is broadly thought of as “natural.” In short, the reason the campaign was so poorly received was that it asked Serbians to abandon all semblance of a broad middle-class understanding of what must happen before they have children, and before they can get to the point of “sacrifice.” It also asked them to ignore the conditions they want to provide for their children, alongside the general despair they feel about state institutions, especially health and education.

ACHIEVING THE POTENTIAL TO “SACRIFICE” ABROAD

Milica, one of my younger interlocutors, explained that she would prefer to raise her future children abroad. Like many young Serbians, Milica states her ideal number of children as three (per Tomanović & Stanojević (2015:51), most young Serbians aspire to have 2 or 3

children). Accordingly, Milica did not see the capacity to have these three children in Serbia:

Tanja: Do you think you'll be able to do that here or, like, again, you see that abroad?

Milica: Yeah, I see it abroad, generally. Because, I want to secure for my children some kind of normal childhood. Not necessarily that they have everything they want, but of course, that they have some nice memories and so on. To have some sort of secure life (*bezbedan život*), to have generally everything they need. Somehow I don't think that's possible here, especially providing for 3 children, I think that's hard.

Despite feeling sad about the idea of having to leave her parents in order to pursue a life abroad, Milica did not see herself being able to raise her ideal of three children in Serbia and provide them the conditions for a “normal childhood.” She explained these conditions as “simply that I don't have to hesitate to provide that for them,” which included, ideally, an extracurricular activity and the ability to go on school-organized excursions. She noted that these were things, “which, before, people — kids — had. But now it's a difficult situation, especially in Serbia.” While Milica did not describe her family as “Yugonostalgic,” she felt that these conditions of normality did exist for her parents' generation and disappeared across the class scale during the 1990s. This retraction of access to extracurriculars, particularly those which increase cultural capital (Lareau 2011), comes at a time when “good parenthood” across the class scale (particularly in the US context) increasingly also means inculcating skills which can later translate to employment opportunities (Manning 2019). As young Serbians increasingly orient their futures, and, like Milica, their hypothetical children's futures, abroad, these extracurriculars likewise are seen as not only important for individual development, but for later career development.

Although some people are able to meet the ingrained “preconditions” for having children within the Serbian imaginary of “responsible parenthood,” they nevertheless feel anxiety about keeping their children *in* Serbia. Maja has achieved most of the preconditions that Ana, Đorđe and young Serbians broadly discuss for having children: stable employment,

an apartment, and a partner who she is moving towards marriage with. However, she still worries about having kids in Serbia due to her hesitations about the country's healthcare and education systems:

It's important to understand that I came from a small city and moved to a bigger one, and so I feel like I've moved forward. Something changed, and that's great. But I'm really irritated by some systemic/structural problems (*sistemski problemi*) which I see, and it hurts to think that my child will grow up in a system which is more and more falling apart and not moving forward (*ne napreduje*). It's true that they made this hotel [we're at the Hilton] quickly, at first sight it looks great and like it's a powerful country (*moćna zemlja*), but our system of education is severely unstable and that upsets me and scares me. The healthcare system is also unstable and I'm afraid that I will eventually have to depend on it. In that sense, I wouldn't like Serbia to be the place that my child grows up, if nothing seriously changes - and I don't foresee a change.

While Maja feels able to eventually achieve what she wants *individually*, she sees the broad system in Serbia as in decline. She reminded me that the newly opened Hilton hotel rooftop where we had our interview only created a *simulation* of a powerful country, but that underneath the surface, the system was crumbling. Unable to see the possibility of systematic change, she imagined her future family formation abroad. Maja thus illustrates a tie between reproduction and emigration, bringing together the two strains of Serbia's "depopulation crisis": even those who feel they can have kids in Serbia may end up leaving as they cannot imagine a future for their children in the country. When looking at registrations of Serbians in Germany, it does seem that many Serbians who are leaving are doing so with their children: in 2017, about 16% of those who emigrated to Germany were children under 15, who presumably moved with their families, in addition to an indeterminate number of minors between ages 15 and 18⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ Of the 20,780 Serbians who registered in Germany in 2017, 3,360 were children under the age of 15 (along with another 965 aged 15-20) (Destatis 2017)

Olivia, who lives in Germany, likewise felt that she could not have her children grow up in Serbia. She and her husband had initially thought about settling in Serbia, but ultimately decided that it was not a good idea if they were going to start a family. Wanting to refrain from “just complaining” about Serbia, she told me of the positives she sees in the country – but then immediately returned to her hesitancy,

I don't want to sound like I'm just complaining about Serbia – that's not true. ... When you sit on the Sava [a river running through Belgrade], it can be the most beautiful thing in the world. There, it's big plusses and big minuses. In Germany, everything is relatively stable. ... Things [in Serbia] can be so lively, soulful, but everyday life would be unbearable for me. The thinking about what's possible, what kind of school the kids will be in, how people even *talk* to kids.

Like Maja, Olivia was concerned about Serbia's education system and the kinds of schools her children would go to if she still lived there. While Olivia retained the ingrained cultural aspect of centralizing motherhood (Tomanović et al. 2016), admitting that having children was what ultimately made her feel like an “adult,” she began to feel like the relations towards children in Serbia were too crude and authoritarian after reading numerous books on childrearing and raising her kids in Germany. Of her childless friends in Serbia, Olivia said,

My friends who live there - I mean, they don't have kids, and they generally say, jokingly, “how are you gonna have kids in this poverty?” and so on. They say that jokingly, but yeah, they want to live. They couldn't travel for so many years, and now they don't want to invest in kids, but to travel. Which is totally understandable. Or, they want to have money so they can go out to a restaurant, or to go out at night and simply to enjoy that. That's at least what it's like with my friends. So if you live in Serbia, you simply live a little differently.

Although Olivia views her friends who have stayed in Serbia and decided not to have children as people who are “choosing” leisure (after years of deep economic instability), she points out an important aspect of their jokes of, “how are you going to have children in this poverty?” Essentially, “choosing” leisure over children is a form of making the best

of a constrained situation, as the choice to not have children is not really a choice at all within Serbian popular understandings of what must happen as a precondition for having kids. Predicting a prolongation of the uncertain present, it seems that young people opt to enjoy what they can in the moment.

After struggling for many years in Serbia with their kids – somewhat unconventionally deciding to have them before obtaining the coveted owned apartment – Uroš and his wife also decided to relocate to Germany. He underlines the aspect of *possibility* in Germany which helps to ease his anxieties towards his children's futures:

I think of Germany as a really good country for raising children, for having a family. People here have a chance to get paid for that which they know how to do. They have the possibility to work. If they don't know anything, they have the possibility to learn, and then be able to work. If they end up without work, they won't end up hungry, because there's some kind of help which can be enough to get through the month. The state doesn't leave them out to dry. Sick people have good healthcare, which is covered, that they don't have to fight with their household budget to pay for it. The food is similarly priced to Serbia's, and there's lots of things which are cheaper. There is always the ability to get something which is a couple euros cheaper, whether it's another brand, or a vegetable which is just a slightly lower quality, or something extra expensive. You always have the possibility, to get something for yourself.

Uroš's centering of *possibility* seems at heart what young Serbians aspire to, particularly the many who desire children but are unsure of the material conditions they can provide for them. In the current uncertain economic and political context in Serbia, neither slogan campaigns nor unstable government incentives provide this needed perspective of "possibility" which ties together education, work, social safety nets, and price stabilizations. Indeed, as Uroš mentions elsewhere in our interview, on top of the existing protections and institutional stability he sees in Germany, their family will receive about 200 euros a month per child throughout their university or vocational education – reaching far beyond the latest Serbian policy which grants financial aid only until a child's tenth

year, and that is, only after the third child. As Uroš points out, Serbians likewise often complain that the prices they encounter for essential needs are frequently more expensive than those they have seen in Western Europe⁴⁵. As such, many of the comment sections on pronatalist news stories are peppered with demands to eliminate taxes on basic goods for children, such as cribs and diapers.⁴⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Despite some of the sentiments of “selfishness” behind the state-level messaging around the “white plague,” Serbians are largely not delaying having children or having fewer children because they don’t *want* them. Instead, the framing of parental obligation through self-sacrifice, and what must be achieved before one can begin to think about starting a family, causes them to indefinitely delay reproduction as they consider their own material capacities to meet this obligation. In short, rather than a value reorientation towards the self which has at times been blamed on “Western cultural influence,” they see the role of parenthood as so vital that they cannot imagine having such a level of responsibility with the precarious positions many young people in Serbia occupy.

In light of Serbia’s recent pronatalist policies, however, they are dually injured by their inability to foresee a time when they can have children, while being forced to suffer through government campaigns which tell them to disregard their deeply ingrained feelings about *when* children are made. These campaigns and policies often result in further anger and distrust toward the state as they feel their economic positions are misrecognized by their government, while their long-recognized rights to abortion are put at risk. Those who already have children, and have paused their desire for more, underscore the concerns of economic and structural instability in the country as they point out their struggles between low wages, frequently delayed institutional support, and dependence on kin networks to

⁴⁵ In my many trips between Minneapolis and Belgrade, I was always asked to bring back items for my friends’ children, as both the taxes and prices are lower in the US than in Serbia.

⁴⁶ Although Serbia once had a tax rebate available for taxes paid on child-related goods, the program was controversially cut in the 2018 law on financial support for families.

make ends meet. With this in mind, it makes sense that parents, not single people, are those who most often choose abortion in Serbia (Eurostat 2018b).

Subsequently, like Uroš, many see a life abroad as one which creates the *possibility* for them to obtain these “basic minimums” while simultaneously allowing them to occupy the role of self-sacrificing parenthood across generations. In these imaginations of life in, primarily, Western Europe, the precarious “prolonged present” they envision in Serbia returns to a progress-oriented future where this culturally salient marker of adulthood is achievable. The reality, thus, is that these national pronatalist campaigns are unlikely to have a broad-ranging effect on many young Serbians who want children in the short term. Until Serbia can resolve its problems of intense labor precarity and access to affordable housing for young people, increased birth rates will likely not follow.

CHAPTER 4: UREĐENA ZEMLJA: AFFECTIVE AND (IN)EFFECTIVE STATES

Even citizens who claim to oppose the state invoke it—simply by talking of “it” in that way—as the explanation of their failures and miseries, or accuse “it” of betraying the national interests of which it claims to be both expression and guardian. In the process, however, they all contribute, through these little acts of essentializing, to making it a permanent fixture in their lives. Few, moreover, ever seem able to manage completely without it. Except, perhaps, in times of quite exceptional turmoil, most citizens of most countries thus participate through their very discontent in the validation of the nation-state as the central legitimating authority in their lives.

– Michael Herzfeld (2016:6), *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics of the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions*

In February 2020, Pavle Petrović, president of Serbia’s Financial Council, said in an interview with the news magazine *Nedeljnik* that Serbia’s “educated and young are leaving because the state is disorganized, not because of low wages.”⁴⁷ He assessed that, even if Serbia’s average wage doubled, this would not stop the country’s massive out-migration, as the biggest predictor for staying within Central and Eastern Europe is not income, but the functioning or “organization” of the state apparatus. Petrović’s statement summarizes

⁴⁷ Nedeljnik, 26 February 2020. <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/obrazovani-i-mladi-odlaze-zbog-neuredene-drzave-a-ne-zbog-male-plate/> Direct quote: “*Obrazovani i mladi odlaze zbog neuređene države, a ne zbog male plate.*”

the broadly held sentiment that Serbia's out-migration is not simply an economic migration, but one inculcated by disappointment in the state itself.

Sociologists and anthropologists have argued that emotions are not just an individual psychological state, but socially and culturally situated practices (Ahmed 2004; Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990; Hochschild 1983, 2016; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Williams 2009) which can be cultivated or mobilized, for example, as nationalist or nation-building projects (Ahmed 2004; Yuval-Davis 1997; Karakaya 2018; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Stoler 2010) or operate as affects which arise as collectively-held "structures of feeling" (Williams 2009), understood as the "different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history" which appear in "the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary or other cultural contexts" (Buchanan 2010:455). Recent work on the sociology of emotions and the state has studied affect in social movements, particularly collective expressions of anger (Bericat 2016; Silber 2011). Social movements scholars of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) contribute to this literature with a politics of *disappointment* within CEE activist movements, whether as unmet post-transition political expectations in Lithuania (Woolfson 2010) or as a condition to be managed in Serbia in order to continue organizing (Greenberg 2014). Disappointment, "a condition of living in contradiction, of persisting in the interstitial spaces of expectation and regret" (Greenberg 2014:8), aptly describes the broad European post-socialist sphere and the failure of "democratization" to uphold the economic, political, and social standards promised in the 1980s and 1990s reforms. Instead, the air of disappointment and its contradiction of expectation and regret, undergirded by the deterioration of paths to social mobility, generates a sense of "stuckedness" (Hage 2009).

Recent work on uncertainty and precarity has moved towards what Rajković (2018) describes as a "virtue of precarity," a shift in the focus of precarious lives as celebrating acts of "resistance" to portraying "various forms of being 'stuck' and living precariously as ultimately *ethical* projects" (54). Rajković sees this virtue of precarity as epitomized in Hage's concept of the "heroism of stuckedness," which emphasizes the act of *enduring* in crisis as an ultimately moral act of "snatching agency in the very midst of its lack" which

“comes to negate the dehumanisation implied by a situation of ‘stuckedness’” (Hage 2009:101). In Serbia, Rajković (2018) and Greenberg (2011) both find a quite different relationship to feelings of being “stuck.” In articulating the sense of entrapment and immobility among her interlocutors as shaped by visa regimes, Greenberg (2011) finds a rhetoric of pervasive “abnormality,” which leaves people feeling like they live in a state of “moral degradation” inculcated through a lawless society, while seeing themselves in positions of “moral ambiguity.” Rajković, studying workers in the liminal soon-to-be privatized Zastava Spare Parts plant, likewise finds his interlocutors feeling “demoralized” (in the sense of being stripped of their morality) through the dual dependence on and dispossession by the state via the “mock labor” they perform in the defunct state-owned factory which still employs them (2018). In line with these findings, I show how my participants likewise felt themselves to be in a state of “moral ambiguity,” perceiving themselves (and the population broadly) as potentially-moral people encompassed by a chaotically organized state which does not care about or provide the capacity for individual moral action. Through my interlocutors’ descriptions of the differences between Western European countries and Serbia, I argue moral agency is projected to “organized countries” where imagined self-evident rules and regulations allow for a rational navigation of social and economic life. In this view, if one truly wants to remove themselves from morally ambiguous “disorganization,” the most logical option is to leave Serbia.

In this chapter, I deal with affects towards the state as a “structure of feeling” (Williams 2009) through my interlocutors’ descriptions of their experiences of “chasing” paperwork, working in the state sector, and the injustices of political and kin affiliations through comparisons with their real or imagined lives abroad. More precisely, I explore the concepts of what is colloquially called an “disorganized state” and its counterpart, the “organized country” (*uređena zemlja*) to understand how a geography of “normality” is produced in the discourse of the blocked future. While the concept of an *uređena zemlja* has been passively noted by scholars of the former Yugoslav countries (cf. Mikuš 2011; Jansen 2015; Johnson 2019b), it has yet to be explored in detail.

To understand why the *state* is such an important aspect of this moral geography of “normality” to my interlocutors, I turn to the work of Spasić and Birešev (2012). In their

research on what they thought would be an “unrelated” topic of social classification and Othering in Serbia, they found that their focus group participants discussed the state as “invested with so many affects, charged with so many powers and responsibilities, and rendered ... the bearer of so many fears and hopes, that it deserved to be spelled with a capital S: *the State*” (their emphasis) (Spasić & Birešev 2012:146). In their analysis, the state appeared as a Leviathan, the producer a multitude of problems such as why “young people choose the wrong role models,” “the vulgarity of media,” (ibid:151), failing to protect and tidy public parks, acting as a creditor and decider of how much money people have (that is, very little), the barrier to children’s sport participation, the barrier to quality education, the cause of collective depression and apathy, and yet also the center of who should fix these problems, often without routes as to what would qualify as fixing them⁴⁸. In this framework of the state, “Its performance in virtually all areas, from political efficiency, to quality of policies, to services it provides to the society, to interface with the citizens, is judged as very bad. Yet on the other hand – and in a sense precisely because of the former – this miserable, skewed “actually existing state” is seen as just a bad edition, a counterfeit version of the idea of “State”, the state as it should be” (ibid: 150-151). In elaborating these far-reaching roles of the state, and proclaiming that “Our state has been hijacked!” (156), Spasić and Birešev’s participants see a state taken over by politicians (“the universal *bad guys* of Serbian transition”) in what should be a “self-standing bureaucratic apparatus” separate from the political field (ibid.). This separation of disinterested bureaucratic governance and emotional politics falls in line with Berezin’s assessment that the “[n]ation-state is a two-pronged institutional and conceptual entity. The state is in the 'business of rule' and focuses upon bureaucratic efficiency and territorial claims; the nation is in the business of creating emotional attachment to the state” (2002:42).

⁴⁸ This concept of the state as both problem and solution can be popularly seen in the meme, “the state sh’d do something” (*država d’uradi nešto*), which has both been used by conservatives who advocate the retraction of the state against “dependence” on it, but also by those who see individuals acting against collective and personal interests (such as littering or damaging public property) and then are perplexed why the state won’t “do something” about it.

My interlocutors' collective depiction of the state is quite similar to these sentiments of Serbia's existing state as a "counterfeit" of what it should be. In describing their disappointments in the state, they often invoke the familial model of the state as ideally functioning both as a paternalistic disciplinarian and maternalistic caretaker (Lakoff 2002), neither of which the "disorganized state" of Serbia succeeds in doing. This family model of the state is nothing new, of course. As Berezin notes, as "kinship is nearly universal, family metaphors resonate emotionally and lend themselves to building a shared national identity" (Berezin 2002:42). These family metaphors can be seen from the early state as the "king's household" (Spasić & Birešev 2012:148), of relationships to the king or sovereign as subjects/children, to more contemporary nation-building and nationalist projects which borrowed the rhetoric of kinship (Calhoun 1997) to "naturalize" nationhood (Anderson 2016), as epitomized in the terms "motherland," "fatherland," "home," or later "fraternity" used to describe the nation-state. This emotional register of intimacy thus can also take the shape of "love" for the nation (Anderson 2016). However, as Ahmed (2004) theorizes, while subjects love their nation and desire to be loved *by* their nation, this relationship is not necessarily reciprocal: "Love may be especially crucial in the event of the failure of the nation to deliver its promise of the good life" yet, in the logic of sunk-cost fallacy, "The subject 'stays with' the nation ... as leaving would mean recognising the investment of national love has brought no value" (130-131). This unreciprocated sentiment of love for, and staying with, the nation-state harks to Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism," where attachment to the object of desire (the loving state) binds us to the conditions of our own subordination.

However, in critiquing the "disorganized state" as a relationship of broken familial reciprocity, my interlocutors turn the familial model of the nation-state on its head, and depict themselves as orphans of a dysfunctional family, giving new meaning to "statelessness" (Rajković 2017) as not documentary illegibility, but abandonment by the "chaotic and disordered" state. Yet in their intended leaving behind of *this* state and aspiration for an "organized country" which provides the capacity for (morally-sanctioned) navigation of social and economic spheres, the state nevertheless remains the "Great

Organizer” (Spasić & Birešev 2012) and object of desire. Thus, these critiques of the state, as Herzfeld (2016) writes, nevertheless center the state as a “central legitimating authority.”

Accordingly, this chapter largely deals with my participants’ critiques of the state as they see it, and how these critiques undergird the state as a central organizer (or disorganizer) of daily life. I begin by illustrating the core meaning of an ‘organized country’ through their comparisons of bureaucratic offices in Serbia and the EU, by which I elaborate the concept of “paperology” to show the increasing everyday dependence on the post-socialist state sector in the proliferation of vital yet unattainable documents. In these interactions with a seemingly ever-present disorganized state, I show how the at times “Kafkaesque” (Vasiljević 2018) situations of navigating Serbian bureaucracy mark the state as a producer of disorganization and corruption. I then move to how the state “works” through the perspectives of my interviewees who have been employed in the public sector and their understandings of the use of political and kin ties which are thought to plague the bureaucratic injustices of the state. In the last section, I turn to how the combination of the political sphere and “disorganized” state sector are understood to emanate everyday moral disorder, producing the citizens of Serbia as orphans of a “broken family” within the discourse of state disappointment. To understand this tying of moral disorder to the state, I mobilize Berezin’s (2002) concepts of the “secure state,” as one which “generates a feeling of social compassion that permits communal empathy, and generosity,” and its inverse, the “insecure state,” which “may be in dissolution *or* in formation,” marked by fear and lack of confidence (38). In looking at the transposition of the morality to “organized states” abroad, I show how the discourse of disorganization serves as a shield against individualized blame. However, in the creation of a dichotomy of immorality-disorganization and morality-organization, those who “take the jump” and move abroad face immense pressure to “succeed,” lest they be marked as incompetent, at best, and immoral at worst.

THE EVER-PRESENT DISORDERLY STATE

An *uređena država* or *uređena zemlja*⁴⁹ in Serbo-Croatian can translate to “organized state,” “orderly state,” or “regulated state,” all of which are essentially synonymous for my purposes. An organized state is broadly understood as one with state institutions that successfully facilitate access to resources necessary to navigate a system. Within slightly more formal discourses, this means low levels of corruption, functional and fair judicial systems, and accessible state institutions such as healthcare and education, although I will later explain that the concept is not restricted to such standardized “global indicators.” As is often the case, sometimes a concept is best explained in a relational context, in this case a “disorderly state,” as Serbia is thought to be. Ivan described what an organized state looks like by explaining the deterioration of the Serbian state sector. He notes that the dysfunction is becoming both *amplified by* and *results in* people going abroad to work or jumping to the private sector:

Ivan: Good, quality people are either going abroad, or they’re getting hired in private firms, and so everything which is the state sector, those institutions, function terribly. Because their cadres are all worse and worse. Good people don’t have a motivation to be there.

Tanja: Do you think that generally the state sector is a problem in whichever country, or—

Ivan: No, that’s here. That’s characteristic literally of our country. I know that my cousins [in the EU] don’t know who their president is, who is their minister of whatever, simply because services — institutions — function perfectly. Meaning, a harmonized, programmed, system which is somehow in the background, a backup which you don’t see. But the things which it deals with function perfectly. So when

⁴⁹ The phrases *uređena zemlja* (organized country) or *uređena država* (organized state) are typically used interchangeably. While *država* (state) tends to specifically deal with the state sector (which is radically more expansive than in the US, meaning nearly all healthcare as even private healthcare workers simultaneously work in the public sector, primary through higher education, social welfare, alongside the remaining nationalized industries such as energy and various bureaucratic apparatuses) and sometimes government (*vlast*), *zemlja* (country) is usually reaches further to encompass nearly everything within the country’s territory. This slippage between the two phrases is likewise how my participants discuss the concept – as something which is both pointed regarding the state sector, while also becoming diffused to the general populace.

you need something, you know where to go, and simply you don't have a need to think about who is your minister, who is your president. That is something which we strive for. It's not that we're far from that ideal, but that it's *lightyears* away.

Tanja: So a good state is one where you don't see it's there.

Ivan: You don't see that it exists, yes. Where here at every step you see its existence, and unfortunately you see it in a negative context.

In contrasting the Serbian state with the experiences of his diaspora cousins, Ivan describes the ideal system as one which is essentially a well-designed digital background application, “a backup which you don't see.” In such systems, Ivan explains, one would not even have to think about which politicians are in power – presumably because they should be experts and not charismatic rulers. In saying this, Ivan incites an important sentiment: in an organized country, one does not *have* to be political⁵⁰. While the topic of the Serbian state and state sector incite a range of emotions, largely negative, the imagined organized state does not incite one to have any feelings about it at all. This assessment of political disinterest aligns with Spasić and Birešev's (2012) participants' framing of the idealized state is a “self-standing bureaucratic apparatus” separate from the political field. However, instead of an invisible yet functional background application, Ivan sees the Serbian state as always in view, perpetually displaying its incapacity to function, “lightyears away” from ever achieving an ideal form.

Although there are many popular examples of Serbian state dysfunction in everyday life, the most prominent tends to be any interaction which requires dealing with Serbia's many bureaucratic offices. Olivia, residing in Germany, explains the clarity of Germany's

⁵⁰ In having such a bifurcated political system since the 1990s, I believe many Serbians are forced to see themselves as political entities in all relations to “the country.” As each successive government is so deeply ideologically laden – nationalist, anti-Milošević, pro-European, anti-European, just to name a couple core oppositions – and these ideologies are reflective of many of the 1990s conflicts, it is nearly impossible to not see oneself as political, even if they opt out of participating in the current political process. Accordingly, many of my interviewees in Germany noted that they do not follow German politics, stating that they had enough time “being political” in Serbia.

bureaucratic system in contrast to Serbia's. She affirms Ivan's assumption that in an organized country, "when you need something, you know where to go."

Olivia: Generally, yeah, the [German] system is gross when you have to do taxes. In Serbia, that's all easier. In Serbia it's automatic: you have no idea how much money they're taking from you, but you don't have to worry.

Tanja: I'm surprised because in some sense the bureaucracy [in Germany] is worse. Or somehow [in Serbia] you just don't have to deal with it.

Olivia: In Serbia? There [the Serbian state] might take more money, here [in Germany] those things are reachable, transparent, and it's clear what the working hours are – and that's *actually* the working hours. It's clear what documents you need for whatever, and it's ... I mean, for me, somehow — [she pauses] like a lot of people like that sort of familiarity in Belgrade. You know? When you go to someone and say, "hey, let me go ahead of others for this or that." I never liked that. I liked things to be fair. If it says that (written) then it should just be like that. You don't need to do anything for me. Because the next time... I mean, simply, I like clear things.

While Olivia finds having to look at how much she is taxed to be disconcerting, she also likes that it is clearly written out and she knows how much she is paying. As such, she mobilizes a moral discourse around the transparency and fairness of the cold bureaucratic state in contrast to the familiar relationships she sees in Serbia. In this sense, both Ivan and Olivia hark an ideal-type of state-as-bureaucracy as they discuss the functions of the state sector, finding justice in formality and technically qualified (rather than party-appointed) bureaucrats.

Olivia points to an important facet of how Serbians understand the downfall of Serbian (and broadly Balkan) society – the pervasive use of social ties (*veze*) which are thought to be the core mechanism of unequal distribution and access to resources. By describing "people" liking the informality of *veze*, she creates an equivalence that almost harks to the joy of getting to cut the long line at the club. Line-cutting tells one that "you are somebody"

who is valuable, if only by the people you know. Čarna Brković's (2017) work explores the relationship of *veze* and sociality in Bosnia & Herzegovina, noting *veze* use in the post-war period as often the only means to navigate restricted but much-needed resources, like education, healthcare, and employment. Like Olivia, however, Brković's participants did not *like* having to rely on *veze* but found them a necessary tool for survival.

Srđan similarly explained the transparency of the German system as a comparison to Serbia's disorganized bureaucracy. He told me about the ease with which he was able to navigate the German bureaucratic system to register his wife who had recently joined him from Serbia, despite speaking no German or English, simply by bringing the correct papers and filling them out in advance with the help of a friend. In comparison, in Serbia, he says that "you're always missing something," meaning a piece of paper which was not listed in the required documents and typically entails going to another office to obtain it and returning the next day. He describes the expansive bureaucracy in Serbia, saying that everything is somehow interconnected and there is a price to be paid, yet requires multiple days of back and forth to get anything done, if it can be done at all. Although Vasiljević (2018) applies the term "Kafkaesque" to the proliferation of incongruent post-Yugoslav citizenship regimes which left those with mixed identities or living outside of their place of birth in strange irresolvable situations, the impossibility of establishing correct paperwork and documentation similarly rings true in the more "mundane" interactions with the state in this section.

During one of his trips to Serbia to see his family, Srđan had gone to the municipal office to make sure his newly paid off house was "clean," meaning everything was in order regarding his ownership. The counter worker told him he cannot get the paperwork, because he had not paid a 72-dinar property tax:

Srđan: Why? She says, "There's a 72-dinar difference from the new taxes." I say, "okay," I mean, 72 dinars... [laughing], and she says, "you'll get a notice and a pay slip (*uplatnica*), go pay and come back tomorrow." I say, "I don't have an entire lifetime to spend here." I left literally because it's just not simple to do anything like this. It's impossible. I went, paid, and gave it to my mom to go the next day

because I can't. "I gotta go back [to Germany] tomorrow, you go to the office and get the paperwork that says our house is clear."

Tanja: Did she succeed?

Srđan: Yeah, she did, but it's like 72 dinars. It sounds insane. You can't get a paper because someone has to pay you 72 dinars. Here [in Germany] you'll get all the paperwork, whatever paperwork you need. You'll get it. If you're owed that, he isn't interested in your debt. You need a paper, you get the paper.

No, back home [*kod nas*], it all has to be paid first. Everything is paid. And without fail, you're missing something.

Tanja: Da

Srđan: You can't have everything. [...] And so, a normal life. For me, there is no normal life there, and there never will be.

Srđan focuses on the 72 dinars because it is the equivalent of about 70 cents in US dollars – a marginal amount of money which prevents him from getting the correct paperwork in the moment, while also posing a significant risk (in that he was not made aware of it) to the future of his home ownership. An unpaid tax, even a very small one, seems to have the ability to escalate into a series of bureaucratic impossibilities, a “chase” (*ganjanje*, cf. Jansen 2015:158 on chasing documents) for the correct documents to pay it, to prove one has paid it, and eventually, to combat information that it was not paid. My landlord, who lives abroad, is persistent in writing to make sure my partner and I pay bills on time and go to the municipal buildings to pick up documents. Discussing the yearly property tax which had not arrived in the mail yet but was to be paid by the end of the week (or to be fined with a late fee), he said, “they’re filling the budget for insane asylums, everything in Serbia is some kind of scam.” In the many discussions I have had with friends on taxes, people believed the state advertently makes them impossible to pay in order to collect fines and boost their budget.

My own experiences with Serbian bureaucracy have been similarly disorienting. When I first arrived in Belgrade in 2015, it took me weeks to figure out exactly where to get a visa. Upon finally getting to the correct location – the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Office for Foreigners, I was met with a waiting room with three rooms inside, all of which seemed like private offices which I did not understand whether or not I could enter. When I knocked and entered – prompted by a kind woman in the waiting room who had lived in Canada and understood me, presumably, as a “lost diaspora person” – I was told that the office was going on a break, but that there is a list of what I need to bring on the wall outside, but that it was to be closed for the day soon and there was no chance of me collecting these documents by then. I had actually seen the list and was still unclear about what was needed, but as I attempted to ask more questions, I was ushered out.

For the second visit, I came with all of my paperwork filled out and the cash ready to pay, with the company of a family friend. Upon checking my paperwork, I was told that I do not fit into any category for a visa. Not versed in pushing for more information, I was prepared to leave. My family friend said, “well, what is she supposed to do? She needs to do her research.” The woman said, “Well, you can just leave every three months.” This means, cross the Serbian border and re-enter the same day. “I’m staying for a year though; wouldn’t that be illegal?” I replied. “We’re not looking,” she said. In essence, the worker instructed me that inhabiting the borderline of illegality was easier than attempting to find a category for myself within the Weberian iron cage of Serbia’s bureaucracy (Weber 2011)⁵¹. Jelena lamented about similar bureaucratic impossibilities regarding her attempts to pay a tax on the apartment she inherited from her mother: “I sold the apartment, and needed to pay something to the state because my mom had gotten it from being a state worker, and there was something left over to pay from the purchase [during the

⁵¹ However, that posed other problems: Upon each entry and exit, foreigners must register their temporary residence, but can only do so with someone who owns property (thus, my partner, a Serbian citizen, could not assist me, nor could our landlord who lived abroad). I eventually realized that it would actually just be easier to get *citizenship* in Serbia than it would to figure out a way to stay as a foreigner, facilitated by the country’s desire to boost the number of citizens by allowing in those who could claim Serbian ethnicity. So, after many back and forth visits to Sarajevo “chasing” the proper documentation, I am now a Serbian citizen.

privatization], like 10,000 euros. To *pay* the state, I literally had to find a *veza* – *beg* for a *veza* – just to get the right phone number!”

In my latest visit to get an identity card, I waited in the early morning with about 10 other people in the police station hallway. As the group inquired what others are waiting for, a man said, “you can’t get anything without waiting in Serbia.” Someone else chimed in, “is their lunch break soon?” and he responded, “no, it’s too early for lunch, they just started. The real question is when the coffee break is.” We collectively chuckled. I was surprised to speedily get to the correct counter window (*šalter*) as most of the group was simply waiting for their passports to be issued, but unfortunately was immediately turned down by the woman at the counter – I was missing a document which was not noted on the official website, and yet she somehow knew this before I even opened my mouth. The refrain “you’re missing one paper” (*fali ti jedan papir*) is so ubiquitous when discussing Serbian bureaucracy (as Srđan noted above, “you’re always missing something”) there is now even an indie board game called “Fali ti jedan papir” which entails answering tax questions to move forward, and being arbitrarily sent backward when landing on the wrong space. In online discussions, the concept is simply referred to by a broadly-understood acronym: FTIP.

In the proliferation of paperwork confirming various assets and statuses which became more prominent or were even introduced in the post-socialist context (private housing, cars, health insurance) alongside constantly changing laws and taxes, it seems new dependencies on the state were created to simply sustain what one already has, while *veze* became increasingly important to navigate the complex system. As Roitman (2005) argues, the retraction of the state does not necessarily entail the retraction of state authority, but instead a reconfiguration of authority through new networks emerging from the interstices of the state system. One such reconfiguration is the rise of bureaucratic paperwork. In a recent conversation with my mother about bureaucratic offices in the former Yugoslavia, she said of post-war Bosnia that, “this is new. I don’t remember ever having to wait like this. I mean, you had to wait, but these lines take half a day.”

Srđan and Jelena both used the term “*papirologija*” to describe the above events surrounding paperwork. While “*papirologija*” typically translates to “paperwork” in English, a more apt translation may be “paperology,” inciting not just paperwork, but paperwork as a *system of knowledge to be studied and navigated*⁵². Paperology brings to mind the horrors of socialist bureaucracies: endless unobtainable documents located in a multitude of unspecified offices, the sound of stamps, smoky waiting rooms, and decrepit government buildings. For all but the wealthiest neighborhoods, this describes my experience in many Serbian government offices pretty well. This paperological bureaucracy is frequently parodied in Serbia’s satirical newspaper, *Njuz*, with headlines such as: “Pregnant woman enters 9th month of wandering between counter windows,” “Legend says there is a counter window which is not currently on break,” and “Man finds himself at the correct counter window in the first attempt.” In the post-socialist context, *papirologija* seems to only have proliferated with new laws, contracts which must be validated (and stamped). For Jelena and many others in Serbia, the privatizations of socially owned housing created many possible paperological hurdles to establishing ownership – even if they were not the original buyer at the point of privatization.

For Ivan, the increase of paperology also translates to increased opportunities for clientelism by even low-level bureaucrats. He describes these *veze* relationships as something that has “always functioned that way” with “our people,” inciting the oft-cited concept of “our mentality” to explain the unexplainable in Balkan cultures (Brković 2017):

Unfortunately, with our people, I think things have always functioned that way. Basically people, even people who don’t have power - who work at a counter window (*šalter*) at the post office, bank, and whatnot - have this need to give themselves power to be asked for something. They wish to use that position - which isn’t even a position, it’s like a really low position — but that woman who works at the post office counter, she wants you to give her something so that she doesn’t

⁵² The “ology” suffix may be from Greek, λόγος (*lógos*, “explanation”), thus giving it the meaning, “papers which explain/tell something.”

push her neighbor forward in the line in front of you. And it's something that you face constantly, at every turn.

Ivan's example of the counter worker touches on a frequent point of conversation of Balkan state sectors and "paperology": the counter window (*šalter*), and its operator, the *šalteruša*. A *šalteruša* is a woman who does not care about anyone in line or their dignity, meets your greeting with a blank stare, and answers the question of "which documents do I need to get this done?" with a long list of the detailed forms explained in coded language, typically in one quick incomprehensible breath after which, of course, no further questions are allowed. Upon your return, she will inevitably tell you that "you're missing one paper," at which point you will be forced to return another day. If she is not actively engaging you, she is drinking coffee at the counter while ignoring the dozens of people in front of her. A Google search on "*šalteruša*" comes up with dozens of parody videos and explanations, and memes of middle-aged women drinking coffee at their desk behind hand-written signs which say "break" (*pauza*). Vukajlija (Serbia's equivalent of Urban Dictionary) entries describe the *šalteruša* using the Simpsons' series characters "Patty and Selma," U.S. Department of Motor Vehicle workers, as an ideal-type example illustrated with their famous quote, "Some days we don't let the line move at all. We call those weekdays." The villainous *šalteruša*, presumed to occupy her post due to a party connection or personal tie, thus also serves as a convenient image for politically-fueled public sector retrenchment.

THE CORRUPTION MACHINE

Yugoslav socialism had a unique discursive relationship to "the state," in that anti-statism – alongside distaste for bureaucracy, centralization, and techno-managerialism – was officially encouraged in the goal of workers' self-management (Mikuš 2016; Woodward 1995) and the Yugoslav project of distinguishing itself from its Soviet counterparts (Jović 2009). While Yugoslav self-management was ideally moving towards the "withering of the state" (Jović 2009) without the withering of social rights (Stambolieva 2016), contemporary anti-state discourse instead has been coopted for the ideological project of public sector retrenchment, as most recently spearheaded by the Serbian Progressive Party

(SNS) in their 2012 rise to power (Mikuš 2016). The above-mentioned *šalteruša* was the imagined face of this reignited discourse of bureaucratic workers as inefficient leeches on the state, though workers in restructured and privatized state companies were the ones who felt the brunt of the public sector slashes. The SNS has done little to resolve the dissatisfaction with the state – and its associations with connections (*veze*) and party politics – that young Serbians feel. Instead, my participants view the state sector as a political apparatus which distributes secure jobs to party members, and keeps its workers indebted to the parties that control it.

Unique for his age, Ivan got a job in the public sector after finishing among the top of his University class. However, with the prevalence of anti-state worker discourse, he feels his academic and other accomplishments are diminished by how people perceive employment in the public sector:

I work in a state institution, and for regular people that seems like an ideal job. ... They think that it's some super secure state job. My cousins asked my parents, 'how did he get that job in the state institution? What connection did he use? How much did you pay for him to get that job?' Which is all nonsense, it doesn't have anything to do with that. But why do people ask that? Because, unfortunately, a good portion of the people in that institution did get their job through a connection, through a friend or cousin, or by paying for it, or through a party connection.

Pointing out that it's not "some super secure state job," Ivan attempts to refute his experience of his temporary labor position against a pervasive discourse which views the public sector in Serbia the most secure form of employment in the country, reserved for ruling party members and those with connections. Marek Mikuš (2016:211) outlines this discourse well, noting that his participants — NGO workers, particularly — frequently commented that, "most Serbians dreamt about landing a public-sector job because that meant a nice salary, near-complete job security and little work. But they would also quip that 'not even a cleaning lady can get a job without a party ID'." For Ivan, this stereotype is especially injurious as it refutes his competence as a professional, and yet the supposed reward — a permanent, secure position — is not something he has access to either. Instead,

he works on a renewable 6-month contract, which is has thus far been extended at each impasse, but is never guaranteed:

Every 6 months the contract is extended. And literally, whenever they extend that contract, they act like they gave me a raise. They think I should be super happy. ... I mean, it is the job for me, in my field [...] it is an ideal job for someone like me. Unfortunately you don't have the opportunity to do things that allow you to learn, to advance, nor to advance in the sense that they let you go to a seminar, a conference, a training - in the end, to give you a raise. You don't have that possibility if you don't have a leader, manager, boss who works on his employees, and those types are rare – or you have a political connection or some other type of *veza*. And that's crushing. You're in a good place, but you're limited on all sides.

Rather than receiving security in exchange for, essentially, the shame of many people presuming he got his position through some nefarious means, Ivan is made to feel like he should be thankful for each contract extension - in essence, grateful that he *gets to work precariously*. Ivan himself acknowledges that he should, in some sense, be thankful by saying, “I mean ... it is an ideal job for someone like me.” In a context of mass unemployment, particularly among young workers, he is exceptional as a recent University graduate who works in his profession. However, Ivan notes that the environment is “crushing” and limited, as he feels he will likely never be allowed to advance or learn further professional skills in order to, eventually, increase his earnings⁵³. Like Kojanić's (2017) participants, workers in state-owned companies in Zaječar, Ivan describes himself as similarly left out of the public sector's morally contested “network of redistribution” by pointing to the necessity to have a political tie or other “*veza*” (connection) to be able to advance.

⁵³ Ivan entered the public sector during austerity measures imposed on Serbia through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) starting in 2012 and proceeding through to today. These IMF regulations entailed a public sector hiring freeze, salary reductions, layoffs, alongside pension cuts. As I understand it, Ivan was likely able to get this temporary job as a necessary employee. Ideally, Ivan will become eligible for a permanent position in 2020 when the hiring freeze is scheduled to be lifted, though he did not mention this possibility in our discussion.

Jelena, a former state worker, explains the use of political connections within the public sector as something which sweeps you up until you are indebted, and then progressively morally corrupted as your entire life depends on the position:

That's just how it works here. You get a party membership and you go in. That's what the system is. My experience [working in the public sector] was that: *nameštanje* (rigging), *spletkaranje* (scheming), *ošljanje* (putting in minimum effort) - you don't do the thing how you're supposed to, but the easiest way. ... Like the idea, "you can't pay me as little as I'm capable of working," that's how it functions here. The wages are low, so why would I work? And then you can be late for work because you have a low pay. ... And so you constantly signal to yourself that you're a bad worker. ... Like if you're late for work, I pay you little. But then I can control you. I let you steal and do whatever you want, so I can control you. ... You know you're not doing what you're supposed to, so then you join the party, they give you a car, an apartment, and then after that you do everything they want. ... I think everyone regrets it eventually, because you eventually can't get out of the system. They always have something to take from you.

Here, Jelena likewise affirms the trope of lazy public sector workers, based on her own experience working in a ministry in her early 20s – a job she clarified that she lost because she was unwilling to join a party. Arguing that laziness (as a result of low wages) is actually the *mechanism* for how the state sector comes to control the laborers within it, she understands the “minimum effort” of workers to contribute to a form of self-subjectification of internalizing oneself as a “bad worker,” combined with certain privileges (a car, an apartment), which makes it impossible to be a moral actor within state institutions. Jelena's self-subjectification of public sector workers paralleled Rajković's (2018) concept of “mock labor” in the Serbian state-owned *Zastava Spare Parts* firm, though in a different context. Rajković describes the effect of the “simulation” of labor for the state – somewhat akin to Jelena's “minimum effort” – as “an ongoing activity of *mocking oneself*, and the values one holds” (ibid: 49). Like *Zastava Spare Parts* workers, both Ivan and Jelena felt “ethically de-subjectified,” or “demoralized” (ibid: 56) by their work for the state. However, unlike Rajković's workers, they were not “encompassed” by

the state into a form of security. Instead, their precarity was not only due to low wages but also due to their positions as either indefinitely temporary (in the case of Ivan) or politically dependent (in the case of Jelena). Earlier in the interview, Jelena had said of her job, “After about a year of working there, I was like, I don’t understand how this state exists at all. How does it at all manage to function?”

Đorđe similarly described rule-breaking as a means of creating political acquiescence when he posited that many school teachers are not *de jure* qualified to teach from their university educations, but enter into the positions out of necessity on the part of schools: “All of that is resolved by the fact that inspections never come to schools. But from the other side it means that you can be given conditions — like ‘join a party,’ or whatever else. So it’s really difficult.” Ivan, despite seeing himself as legitimately achieving his position, went further in describing most state jobs as a new social welfare category in the absence of commonly understood universal state-provisioned welfare:

An enormous amount of people work in state institutions, because that’s a way to have an electoral apparatus which you control. Literally, unfortunately, these jobs have become a welfare category. Meaning, instead of your job and wage being a motive and reward for some job you’ve accomplished, it’s becoming a form of welfare benefit [*socijalno davanje*] for people. You employ people so that they won’t be in the unemployment bureau. That’s not — I mean, it can’t function like that.

Beyond seeing it as a broad ideologically-operated and “hijacked” (Spasić & Birešev 2012) sector, Ivan explains these public sector positions as a form of restricted social welfare for those who are tied to political parties (regardless of the party). However, their function is not simply to keep a captive “electoral apparatus,” but to reduce the lines at the employment bureau while state-sponsored social welfare itself – healthcare, basic benefits, and even education – is retracting. While the discourse of lazy party-affiliated public sector workers is a powerful ideological tool for moralizing retrenchment, there is also evidence that party affiliation does impact employment as seen through turnover when new parties come to power (Dragojević & Konitzer 2013). Thus, Ivan’s assessment of party hiring within the

public sector points to an understanding of restricted social citizenship (welfare in the form of secure jobs) for those who are aligned with the party in power, and a broken state support system for those who are not.

THE POST-YUGOSLAV ORPHANAGE: MATERNALISM, PATERNALISM, AND MORAL PERSONHOOD UNDER UNCERTAINTY

As Jelena and I discussed why young people are generally leaving Serbia, she referenced a poll which had then recently circled around Facebook. It asked people to answer, “For what reasons would you leave Serbia?” (Nedeljnik 23/03/2018) The top result was, “I want to live in an organized country” (*Želim da živim u uređenoj zemlji*)⁵⁴. Jelena was surprised that she was not the only one considering leaving for reasons outside of the economy. She elaborated on why this might be:

I mean, in some way, the state is a kind of surrogate for your parents. On the global level, that’s your parent. And so, as a kid, okay, you can have a merry/cheery [*vesela*] mom that’s all fun and games, but when you’re little and you depend on her ... you need that structure to feel secure. At the end of the day, it’s that, I give you something, you give me something back. That’s what worries people the most. Okay, of course, it’s everywhere to some level - there’s nowhere you’re 100 percent secure. But when you’re living under this level of insecurity, then... Like your friend said, when you get something secure for yourself, then you can start thinking about others. You can even start thinking about some nicer things, not that your life revolves around thinking about what you’ll eat, how I’ll survive the day. But one

⁵⁴ This category received 10 percent of the votes (3269), followed closely by “*because of incompetent and thieving politicians*” (9%, 2848), “*because of corruption*” (8%, 2701), and “*because nothing will ever change here*” (8%, 2582). The methodology of the survey was not rigorous, and the headline likely primarily attracted those who were considering leaving (only 1% of responses said they would never leave). Those polled could choose multiple categories, meaning that there is likely cross-over between those who responded to these categories and, with that, that much more than 10% of the respondents checked that they want to live in an orderly country. As such, I see this poll as an artifact of the discourse around emigrating from Serbia, rather than any representative depiction of the general population (though it may represent those who want to leave or have already left).

really large part of the population here is having to think about that - I frequently stop and think, “how do people survive here?”

In comparing the state to a parent – going so far as to compare her own mother’s struggle to take on care responsibilities after the passing of her father – Jelena describes people’s relationship to the state as something which is deeply intimate: a reflection of the family itself. While she acknowledges that nowhere in the world is “100% secure,” meaning socially and financially, Jelena describes the level of insecurity in Serbia as one which does not allow people to think beyond their day-to-day survival. As such, her logic follows that of Berezin’s (2002) understanding of the “insecure state.” If “secure states” generate “feelings of compassion that permits communal empathy, and generosity” (ibid: 38), Jelena’s description of Serbia’s “insecure state” insinuates that Serbians are unable to move into aspects of moral personhood, those which involve caring for others and civic action to improve day-to-day life. Turning the well-documented nation-building rhetoric of the nation as a reflection of family and kinship (Berezin 2002; Calhoun 1997; Anderson 2016) on its head, Jelena describes Serbia as a family torn asunder by the incapacity of maternal and paternal characters to bring order to everyday life.

Instead of an organized state which allows for the production of people who care for others, Jelena sees the state as something which produces disorder and nonsense, no matter who is in power. “That cog is designed so that it actually suits you when you’re in it, that everything that’s happening benefits you,” she explained, “and so all of [these politicians] enter into that machine, into management, and then the cogs just turn, making it into the nonsense that it is.” In Jelena’s understanding, the state essentially appears as a “black box” which nobody can comprehend *how* exactly it functions, and whether it really *does* anything, other than reproduce itself by producing nonsense (that is, disorder).

Ivona similarly connected these feeling of state disorganization, unpredictability, and capacity for individual morality in her aspiration to go abroad. Inciting the state’s lack of provision of social citizenship, she noted,

If I could get these basic needs met, I'd like to help other people. I feel incapable of helping myself right now, and so it's like, how can I help someone else if I can't help myself? ... but at the moment my life situation totally doesn't depend on me.

While Jelena and Ivona both mention economic insecurity – in describing an ideal of existing beyond bare survival – as a factor for not being able to participate as moral citizens, they center this insecurity in the unpredictability of the state and the incapacity to plan in the long term due to structural unpredictability. The state, as the central actor in organizing – or perhaps *disorganizing* – their lives (Herzfeld 2016), thus produces the limits of agency for the two women. While Jelena has accepted this, taking on Hage's (2009) "heroism of stuckedness" in considering herself as now "thinking more in the moment," and as such choosing to see herself as agentic *in spite of* the state, Ivona still feels stifled in her complete lack of capacity to change her life at home, not just economically but to the point of accessing resources (such as healthcare) which she's legally entitled to but unable to attain without deploying *veze*. As such, she aligns herself closer to Rajković's (2018) sense of "demoralization" in desiring to be someone who "helps others" but feels she cannot do so because she is "unable to help herself."

TWO STEPS FORWARD, FIVE STEPS BACK

The implication of an *uređena zemlja* does not have a particular ideological core in how my interlocutors describe it – that is to say, it does not necessarily imply an expansive social welfare system or an interventionist state sector, as a "normal country" often does. Instead, an *uređena zemlja* is often understood as simply one where the system "makes sense," where, as Jelena says, "I give you something, you give me something back." In a cab ride home from the airport in November 2019, the driver and I discussed my trip to the U.S., the surreal warm weather Belgrade had while I was gone, how quickly the Belgrade Waterfront buildings are coming up, and how the landscape of the river looks different every few weeks. Like many other taxi drivers, he told me about his family abroad, and that he does not want to go, but has had the option. "I don't want to leave," he said. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I mostly live a normal life, we have a house, things are okay. I've had offers.

[...] But you never say never. I live normally but certainly I'm upset with this government, and so you never know." We had talked about the differences between the U.S. and Serbia, and I said that the U.S. itself isn't so great for workers. While some people make lots of money, others barely scrape by with multiple jobs. He said, "even so, when you move to other countries, you at least know the rules of the game, even if it's not a great game. Here, you don't know whether the game will change. It's 1 step forward, 5 steps back. The government says, 'oh, okay, you're complaining, so here's a step forward.' But it's always 5 steps back along with it."

In our discussion, the taxi driver summarized the problem with living in a "disorganized country": never knowing what the future will hold, because the "rules of the game" constantly change, and thus never having the capacity to act with agency in the long term. Thinking about whether anything has changed since the 1990s and early 2000s, Ivona said:

Everything's the same as it's always been, what can I say? Some kind of apathy, dissatisfaction, corruption — small and large. Everyone is looking for day to day survival. You can't make any sort of big plans for your life. Nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow, nor the day after tomorrow, pretty much you can't plan your life more than a month in advance. Only to survive to the next bill. There aren't people with big plans. At least from my surroundings. Maybe somewhere there are people with big plans and whose dreams come true, but to me that seems like a fairytale in this country.

While contemporary capitalism, whether called risk society, liquid modernity, late modernity, or the neoliberal era, puts the onus on individuals to plan for the future (Beck 2009; Bauman 2000), the constantly changing legal and economic landscape of the Western Balkans makes planning seem impossible. Under such uncertainty, the lack of sense of individual agency can result in understanding oneself in conditions of "moral ambiguity" or even "pathology" (Greenberg 2011:95). For Ivona, a state which facilitates the capacity to be able to *plan* means the individual capacity for people to move beyond basic survival – what she and many others call a "normal life." Achieving that status of agentic normality, what Jelena calls a form of "security," also means moving beyond the

survivalist greed which facilitates corruption and towards helping others, a marker of moral personhood under the “secure state” (Berezin 2002). While ‘disorganized countries’ such as Serbia are thought to produce subjects who exhibit non-normality (Greenberg 2011), organized countries conversely produce normal – that is, moral – people. Thus, moral citizenship is spatialized in a geography of order and disorder, and morality is placed within reach by moving to an orderly country.

DIFFUSION TO THE POPULACE: HOOLIGAN PRESIDENTS AND TRASH ON THE STREET

While the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) ran a platform as the party which would “eliminate” the “corrupt public sector,” now, about 9 years after Mikuš’s (2016) fieldwork, many of my interlocutors describe this public sector as synonymous with the SNS itself. In essence, the SNS is seen to have performed a sort of state capture in conjunction with the black-box state. Rather than a populist route away from state dysfunction, the SNS has instead affirmed a “blocked future” for young Serbians which means that there is no alternative to the status quo. As Ivona said, “everything’s the same as it’s always been.”

The transition of Aleksandar Vučić from Prime Minister to President – in conjunction with the expansion of presidential powers – affirmed this feeling of the SNS party as entrenched into every aspect of the state and all other forms of life⁵⁵. Upon his presidential election in 2016, cities such as Novi Sad and Belgrade saw massive “Protests Against the Dictatorship” which lasted for months but nevertheless failed to oust the party. Ivan explains President Vučić as, “basically also the president of the municipality, and the community, and the minister of culture, and the minister of *everything*. It’s all one guy. He’s asked whether this lightbulb needs to be yellow or white, and whether we need to have good relations with China or not. This is the spectrum of all of everything he’s involved with.” Edited videos and memes poke fun at the president taking over the evening weather forecast and working at construction sites, while *Njuz* runs with the joke with

⁵⁵ Yet, we may wonder if this sentiment is new, or just the same discourse applied to a new party, as Spasić and Birešev (2012) likewise noted this feeling of corrupt political entrenchment in 2012, before the rise of the SNS. Nevertheless, the SNS’s 8 years of rule may be an unprecedented form of extreme political entrenchment, a testament to the possibility of “worse” when people thought it “couldn’t get worse.”

headlines such as, “Vučić announced he will solve every pensioner’s crossword puzzle,” and “President Vučić leaves for Chicago to rescue Serbs from snow.”

Olivia – like many people I have met in Belgrade – connects the general erosion of social values in Serbia to the current political party. Explaining that, while her mother nostalgically viewed 1970s Belgrade as a bustling metropolis, Olivia instead sees “that people spit on the street, that they throw garbage next to the garbage can, not into the garbage can, and that they blow their nose on the street.” She is particularly disappointed in how her four-year-old daughter, who has spent most of her life in Germany, sees Belgrade:

My daughter says to me, “in Belgrade, people spit on the street.” I’m sad that that’s her picture of it. I make an effort to go to Ada [a beach in Belgrade], and the Sava [a river which runs through the city and flows into the Danube] ... but nevertheless you see these things. ... I think the politics is definitely a large part of why this is happening. The president, who is a hooligan - I mean, football hooligans don’t have to be cattle [*stoka*], I mean, there’s sporting spirit and all of that can be wonderful – but when you say “hooligan in Serbia” it carries with it some other meaning.

A president who’s in a [football] club, and his son, it’s *bahato*. That is how I’d describe today’s government, and something which bothers me is that I see it more and more in society: *bahatost* and *prostakluk* (vulgarity).

The concept of “*bahato*” does not have a direct translation to English, but is akin to a combination of entitlement, recklessness, and carelessness towards others. In Serbian popular culture, *bahato* is sometimes used in a positive connotation for wild carefree partying – particularly among Turbofolk⁵⁶ fans. Olivia, like my teenaged interlocutors at

⁵⁶ Turbofolk is a style of music mixing traditional Balkan folk with electronic instrumentalization, popularized in Serbia during the 1990s. Though the themes largely deal with love and vice, rather than politics, the genre was largely associated with right wing nationalists in the 90s, particularly as the iconic Turbofolk singer Ceca was married to the Serbian war criminal and paramilitary commander “Arkan.” Today, Turbofolk has a much broader listenership across the former Yugoslav region, but for many Belgradians still carries connotations of right-wing nationalism, glorification of war, and authoritarian “brainwashing” (Papović & Pejović 2016). Combining the concepts of *bahatost* and *prostakluk*, the Turbofolk genre and its listeners (in the 90s called “dizelaši,” for wearing Diesel brand jeans), were typically associated with “primitivism” (*primitivizam*).

Belgrade Professional secondary school, traces *bahatost* and hooliganism as a possible outgrowth of the “wild” era of 1990s (see Chapter 1). However, Olivia also says that it is diffusing from Serbia’s current political apparatus. Contrasting with her mother’s Yugoslav-era Belgrade-as-metropolis, in one fell swoop Olivia connects contemporary Serbian politics to general social *bahatost* and vulgarity, to people throwing trash *next to* the trash bin and spitting on the street – something she feels sad that her daughter notices as picture of Serbia through the gaze of an “outsider” from Germany. In connecting these mannerisms and politics, Olivia describes this disorder of *bahatost* as something which spreads through the social body, originating from the height of Serbian politics and diffusing into the mundane behavior of ordinary people.

Incidentally, trash was something mentioned by *every single interlocutor* in this chapter, without any prompting. Jelena similarly described people spitting and throwing garbage as a signifier of moral degradation and stark difference from how she grew up, while Ivan pointed to trash as necessary starting point of changing mentalities: “nobody wants to start from themselves, from their own yard, and to say, come on, I’ll try to not throw trash on the ground. How about I try to not give a bribe if someone asks for it; that I report them. ... Very few people here are starting to think in those terms.” Many interlocutors discussed how their first reflection on Serbia after returning from abroad was, “realizing how much trash there is.” Ivona wrote to me a few days after our interview that she forgot to mention another important reason she wants to leave is, “everywhere you look is a garbage dump.” Conversely, Srđan explained how, in Germany, there is no trash on the ground:

I mean, you have everything [in Germany], but it’s restricted. It’s very organized; they’re very organized. You see that there’s no trash here? [he points to the street] Because there’s cameras everywhere. ... Like, okay, there are the real drunks who leave bottles everywhere. But there’s people who collect bottles and they live from that. But the cattle back home throw that and break it. And that doesn’t matter to anyone. But here, if you stood there and threw a cigarette box, you’d get filmed by at least five cameras.

While I expected Srđan to have conflicted feelings about surveillance and asked him about that, he instead lamented that Serbia cannot – or does not bother to – create such apparatuses to enforce rules, such as littering laws. To answer my question, he continued with an explanation of how this refusal to create structures for preventing littering also connects to *lack of care* on the part of the state, and to bigger problems, such as not enforcing speeding regulations, while also selectively enforcing taxes.

This relationship to “filth” is not a new way of seeing post-socialist Europe from the perspective of the West (Gille 2004, 2007; Bjelić 2006)⁵⁷, but within this literature filth has largely discursively been understood as a product of socialism itself. My interlocutors, however, see it as product of the post-transition political and social landscape, and a diffusion from the corrupt contemporary state to the everyday person. In all cases, trash functioned as a physical signifier of state and individual disorder in Serbia, often likened to a “broken windows” logic (Kelling & Wilson 1982): the broken system makes people throw trash on the ground, while seeing others do it makes oneself also become careless⁵⁸. Srđan’s desire for enforcing littering laws through fines points to the desire for a traditional paternalist aspect to the state⁵⁹, one which restricts people for their own good (Goodell 1985; Lakoff 2002), while providing an example to the population of what a “decent” person is. People who are reasonable, rule-following, and moral simply do not throw trash on the ground, but, more importantly, reasonable, orderly, states *would not let them*. Neither Serbia, nor Serbians, now fall into these moral social categories, according to the blocked future discourse.

Many of those who discussed trash likewise stated that they felt quite “alone” in their perspective, for example, in Ivan’s comment that, “very few people here are starting to think in those terms,” and Jelena’s surprise about the online survey results mentioned in the beginning of this section. This sense of isolation in being “normal” indicates a means

⁵⁷ See also McClintock (2013) on the dichotomy of cleanliness/filth in colonial discourse and “civilizing” missions.

⁵⁸ One interlocutor who was living in Germany actually cited a study based on the concept of “broken windows” to explain why trash is so important.

⁵⁹ As opposed to a libertarian paternalist state, or “soft paternalism,” which functions through what is called ‘nudging’ (Jones, Pykett & Whitehead 2011)

to distinguish oneself from the social disorganization of the Serbian state and populace. It likewise undergirds Jelena's statement of the state as a broken family, and thereby making the "normal" citizens (as its "children") appear much like orphans in search of a new home.

We might understand the broad disappointment in the state as a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 2009), emotions which are, though produced by people who do not know each other, still patterned and organized responses that can be analyzed. However, the sense of "aloneness" also points to this discourse as *emergent*, meaning neither dominant (of the status quo) or residual (of the displaced status quo), but still "in solution" (ibid:133)⁶⁰. As such, the blocked future discourse as an emergent response to everyday life in the country is not quite amenable to uptake by entrenched politicians. Although political parties can use 'blocked future' rhetorical tropes to critique their opponents (for example, by pointing to Serbia's out migration rate as a population crisis and reflection on the ruling party, or the SNS's anti-state sector rhetoric), they also, by their very role, must attempt to establish promissory legitimacy in their capacity to enact state-level change (Beckert 2019). However, as the blocked future discourse as a whole understands that change itself is nearly impossible, it is instead most amenable to inciting migration.

THE MORAL SHIELD OF DISORGANIZATION AND THE CRUEL OPTIMISM TOWARDS THE ORGANIZED STATE

Miro had moved to Germany to work for his friend's construction company, after struggling for years to find a job in either Serbia or Montenegro with his degree. His goal was to eventually learn German well enough to be able to move towards his white-collar vocation, or at least be able to send remittances to his parents. He particularly felt a debt to

⁶⁰ However, the discursively incited sense of isolation may also be a moral boundary-making to distinguish people from seeming masses of internal Others who are participating in amoral behaviors (ranging from corruption to spitting). While these internal Others were in the 1990s and early 2000s typically rural "*seljaci*" (literally, villagers, but pejoratively used more closely to "rednecks" or "bumpkins") who were distinguished by, for example, wearing "white socks" (Jansen 2005), only my interlocutors who were from rural areas ever mentioned rural people and generally not in a negative context. Instead, this boundary-making language has shifted from an urban/rural divide to a coded one pointed towards those who are "brainwashed" by party-sponsored "Pink TV" and "reality shows."

them for supporting him for so long; “I didn’t want to be one of those people who sit around on their parents’ dime,” he said. After a few months of working for his friend, Miro went to a temporary employment agency to look for another position which would be less physically taxing. For 8 months, he worked in a large-scale shipping warehouse, and was satisfied with his pay and working conditions. However, when he went to renew his work visa, he was told that he had been working illegally the entire time. As he was registered by the first employer, his visa only allowed him to work for them.

For working “illegally,” he was fined 7,000 euros or 1 year in jail. With no money to pay the fine, Miro could not return to the Balkans unless he spent the year incarcerated first. Yet, strangely, he *could* get a job in Germany to work off his debt, sending him into essentially a year of indentured servitude. Unfortunately, as he was not on a permanent contract, he could not go back to the shipping company that he enjoyed working for and instead found a job in construction through another friend. When I went to meet him at the construction site, I noticed his shirt said “*TIRED*” in large letters, stylized in the Nike logo, which aptly described how he appeared. He complained that his hands were cramping from the work, that he had aged beyond his years (28) in this short span, and had lost a lot of weight. For each check of about 1500 euros, he said that 700 goes to the fine, and 500 to rent (arranged incredibly cheaply through a diaspora family member). The remaining couple hundred euros cover his other needs in one of the most expensive parts of Germany. Miro explained that he feels like he’s wasting his time and his education but has no way to get out of the situation other than so keep moving forward. Summarizing our interview, he said, “I don’t know what I did to God to deserve this. I didn’t think I was a bad person; I don’t know what I did.”

Miro’s sense of self as punished by God – that is, questioning his innate moral worth – shows the risks of the geography of morality as mapped onto organized and disorganized countries. While in the Balkans, Miro was able to see himself as a moral person – one who *wanted* to financially support his parents and achieve the expected status of a provider – but who was constrained by a disorganized state and a clientelist hiring system. The discourse of disorganization thus also shields people from blame for their less-than-ideal life situation as they can nevertheless see themselves as moral people – if not in the

moment, then at least “in waiting.” In “organized” Germany, however, all the blame fell on Miro, and he could do nothing but see himself as at fault for what many people would otherwise simply consider a deeply unfortunate but reasonable misunderstanding of the visa regime (and possibly grave negligence on the part of his employer.)

The upshot of tying the ‘clear’ rules of “organized countries” to the achievement of moral personhood is that those who fail ‘in the game’ are seen as (and see *themselves* as) morally questionable. People who return to the Balkans from “the West” are continuously quizzed as to why they returned, as I watched happen to a good friend on numerous occasions⁶¹. Those who explain that life abroad is difficult as well are often called lazy or incompetent. Why else would someone “fail” when the rules of the game are clear? Srđan responded to the perceptions of his life in Germany:

Explain that to a man down there, that just to rent – not buy – an apartment, you need 10,000 euros. Just to get inside. ‘Oh, brother, it’s easy for you’ (*Au, brate, lako je tebi*). Who’s it easy for? A guy works for half a year sleeping in some shared room where he pays 300 euros a month just to survive, to get enough money to get an apartment because his wife is coming and pregnant. [...] And then you tell them you paid 10,000 euros [to rent the apartment], they say, ‘you’re an idiot.’ Well, you come and find it cheaper! They search online, ‘look, a room for 300 euros.’ What do you have in that room? There are 4 beds, one is yours.

In noting the differences in perception of wages, money, and expectation between Serbia and Germany, Srđan retorts to the most adamant mobilizers of Serbia’s “blocked future” discourse who view people that struggle after emigration as simply incompetent, without ever having attempted it themselves: “Come and see. When you see it, then you know what it’s like.” While my participants had much more nuanced understandings of life abroad (many of them currently or previously having lived outside of Serbia themselves), this perception persists in everyday life, unjustly seeing those who recently emigrated on nearly

⁶¹ This friend had returned simply because she missed being home, yet, despite leading a quite comfortable life abroad, was presumed to have fallen on hard times by everyone who questioned her repatriation. She was incessantly grilled as to why she did not just stay long enough to “get papers,” and her stint abroad was often dubbed a waste of time.

equal footing with those who were born in “orderly countries.” Thus, while the “blocked future” discourse is quite empathetic to the struggles of those remaining *in* Serbia, it is much less so with those who have “taken the jump.” Nevertheless, Srđan said of his life in Germany, “the roses don’t bloom here either, but it’s better.” Miro, too, despite his misfortune, intended to stay after paying off his fine, hopeful that his life in “normal” Germany will be better once he works off his visa infraction. Yet, considering all he had gone through, his optimism felt particularly “cruel” (Berlant 2011) in that moment.

CONCLUSION

Although Yugoslav anti-statism aimed towards the “withering of the state” without the withering of social rights, Serbia instead appears to have proliferated the state – as a bureaucracy – while retracting social rights and eliminating labor positions in state sector businesses (Kojanić 2017; Mikuš 2016). In elaborating the concept of an “organized country” through critiques of *veze* (social ties), political parties, paperology, and the bureaucratic clarity of Western European countries, my participants show their perception of the Serbian state as one which has failed to uphold the relationship of reciprocity between citizens and the nation, while creating dependencies on the state in novel ways.

In their critiques, my interlocutors point to the desire for the return⁶² of social order among perceived disorder (Simić 2016); to a space of agentic capacity (Greenberg 2011), where “the rules of the game” are evident and do not change every few years. However, years of political disappointment has made it feel as though nothing will change, as the state itself (that is, the Serbian state) has become the problem, not which party is in power. As such, the blocked future discourse does not understand the political sphere in Serbia as a waiting game for the right political candidate. Instead, leaving becomes one of the few routes to disconnect from disorder, much to the disappointment of political parties who organize around a promise of a “secure future.”

⁶² Though the referent point for “when” this social order existed is ambiguous, it is simply thought to have existed at some point.

In describing themselves as people who do not take pleasure in using connections or throw trash on the ground, my interlocutors also work to morally delineate themselves as *orderly people deserving of an “orderly country.”* While some internal Others (namely politicians, but also state workers) may have been too corrupted by the state mechanism, parties, or “our mentality,” my participants frequently point to the fact that “our citizens are able to behave normally in other countries” as a testament to this aspect of moral ambiguity being not about *individuals* but the social space of the contemporary Balkans. This social space produces state disorder through failing to both govern and provide for its citizens, and, fitting in the family metaphor, likewise produces individual disorder. Only once one removes themselves from the disorganized state, can they become moral, orderly, people as well.

However, equating morality with the capacity to navigate an “organized” system places an incredible stigma on Serbians who struggle after migration, and especially those who return. Thus, while the ‘disorganized state’ aspect of the blocked future discourse is quite forgiving of those *in* Serbia, shielding them from the turn to individualized blame so prevalent across established liberal democracies, it places an overwhelming burden on those who move abroad to “succeed” while allowing them little room to seek empathy in their journey.

A BRIEF CONCLUSION: THE IMPENDING GLOBALLY BLOCKED FUTURE, POST-2020.

I wrote the final parts of this dissertation hidden away in my apartment in Belgrade, as the COVID-19 outbreak hit the globe. As concern about the virus itself gave way to concern about the impending economic effects of a months-long worldwide economic “shut-down,” the impacts of which we have yet to truly see, I wonder how the world thinks about the many possible futures which are opening and closing to us as I write this. As Western economies will surely suffer among all others, the question of whether an imagined mobility to the “West” will have as much salience in the coming years as it did to my interlocutors in the months preceding 2020. My hope is that governments globally begin to reconsider the importance of social citizenship once again, and perhaps take note of the Balkans’ imaginations of a humble “normal life” not as a luxury of the few, but as a right of all people.

As the Polanyian (1957) double movement for re-embedding the economy and guaranteeing social welfare has failed to take place again and again over the last decades of economic “shocks,” recessions, and general instability, I am skeptical that this will happen without significant pressure “from below.” In this sense, I hope that the dream of a “normal life” imprints on us Appadurai’s (2013) “capacity to aspire” to better things than what we are dealt by luck and chance as organized through the structural inequalities which operate globally and locally. We can see some of these aspirations being enacted in the rent strikes which have happened in the last months in the US and Australia. Likewise, we can see them in the many people on social media and in their private homes realizing how much they missed their families and free time to pursue creative activities, and how much their jobs are what David Graeber (2019) has called “bullshit jobs”: those which, if they ceased to exist as work in one moment would change nothing in the world for the worse. In this sense, the global COVID-19 outbreak has shown us exactly what counts as “essential”

work and what forms of work we can do without if only we moved away from our definition of work as something we all begrudgingly need to do to survive.

In an unintended insight into a speculative post-2020 global situation, my research shows what people may have to look forward to once the “normal life” disappears among the ever-dwindling populations who still possess such a thing. In the retraction of the welfare state under conditions of extreme economic instability, we can see how a home and family support become vital facets of maintaining biographical certainty and ontological security, while renters in homeowner societies are particularly left in precarious positions. Likewise, we see how futures become geographically distributed by state regimes, where some states are thought to “provide a future” while many from others are left in the position of physically searching for such a future-filled place. This search often takes its form with a sense of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011), a longing for places and people who can provide us the security we so desire.

Thus far, the ideology of neoliberalism has framed these anomic “futureless” spaces of being as specks of dispossession in an otherwise wealthier planet brought through trickle-down economics; in this institutionalized individualization, the dispossessed are seen to only have themselves to blame. However, when most of us find ourselves dispossessed and dislocated, we are suddenly faced with the reality of what the massive rise of risk as a global framework means, showing us precisely how precariously most people live, even those from relatively privileged contexts. Ironically, those who are used to economic crisis as the status quo may be best prepared to face the coming years (Archer 2018); hopefully they will find new comrades who can reignite a collective capacity to aspire, not just abroad, but at home too.

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