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YOUTUBE AS A NEW SITE FOR POLITICAL DEBATES: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECONCILIATION IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The internet and social media have radically transformed the traditional divide between private and public by introducing new virtual spaces. This creates the possibility to create various semi-private and semi-public compartments that have enabled the emergence of 'participatory culture' that blends creators and their audiences who both produce and consume. The digital ethnography research described in this paper explores influencer culture in former Yugoslavia to uncover specific reconciliation narratives and find out how social media can potentially contribute to normalising relations between different ethnic groups in the region.

Key words: digital ethnography, former-Yugoslavia, influencer, prosumers, social media

Youtube as a New Site for Political Debates: New Opportunities for Reconciliation in the Former Yugoslav Countries

Ivana Stepanović

1. Introduction

The internet and social media have radically transformed the traditional dualism of private and public by introducing new virtual spaces where they overlap and continuously reconfigure. The possibility to create various semi-private and semi-public compartments allows for what the anthropologist Daniel Miller calls 'scalable sociality' and a whole range of colours between the 'most private' and the 'most public' information (Miller 2016: 3). This has enabled the emergence of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd 2016: 10) that blends together creators and their audiences who are at the same time producers and consumers or 'prosumers' (Gerbaudo 2015: 81; Dyer-Witheford 2015: 92; Duffy et al 2021: 1; Fuchs 2014: 245). Influence spills over to larger communities in the virtual social spaces within networks that are at the same time new broadcasting companies and new communication platforms. In the world of social media, online communities are being created independently of geographic limitations or ethnic and cultural identities, which is why they seem to transcend the physical borders of states and regions while following a different logic of interconnectedness. In former Yugoslavia, the parallel universe of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and other social media allows for establishing new bonds, new transnational collaborations and new collective identities for new generations.

The ethnic conflicts that lasted from 1991 to 1999 in former Yugoslavia resulted in the dissolution that has generated 'frozen conflicts' (Bieber 2008; Perry 2018), ethnic hatred and even far-right extremism that can be seen as a continuation of the politics of the 1990s in terms of nationalist ideas (Kelly 2019). Reconciliation in the region of the Western Balkans was coloured by the communist legacy reinforced by the hardships of transition (Jensen 2020: 12). Numerous attempts that mainly came from the civil sector and international actors is now widely perceived as a 'failed' project (Balfour 2017; Stratulat 2017) leaving the newly-formed states in an atmosphere of perpetuated nationalist sentiments. After the conflict, the paradigm of transitional justice and its mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and NGO initiatives such as REKOM, did not succeed to bring about reconciliation (Kostovicova 2017; Dragovic-Soso 2016), while other types of NGO

projects and cultural exchange had some impact on restoring broken relations (Edwards 2016; Touquet 2015), but their outreach has been limited to particular smaller groups of people.

But while transitional justice and other peacebuilding projects have delivered limited results, online communities across the region have started new reconciliation practices that have been largely neglected by the political actors and social sciences. Operating according to different principles, these practices are not considered official reconciliation projects because are rather sporadic, unorganised and perhaps completely unintentional. However, considering their visibility on social media, they might be more impactful than all other reconciliation strategies and practises. YouTube, as a social media network and a broadcasting platform, is one of the online public spaces where individuals can create their own TV channels that attract more views than traditional broadcasting companies. It is a new space for political debates that is increasingly taking over the position traditional media once held. While it also generates content dominated by hate speech and nationalist narratives, it opens up opportunities for reconciliation initiatives as well. These initiatives mainly come from YouTube 'influencers' from former Yugoslavia – video content creators who work together as part of a 'Balkan' network. Influencers are commonly defined as individuals who have grown to become social media celebrities with huge followings (Khamis, Ang, Welling 2016) due to their content published across different social media, and their 'influence' is measured by the number of people who regularly consume their content.

This digital ethnography research project aims to explore influencer culture in former Yugoslavia to uncover specific reconciliation narratives and find out how social media can potentially contribute to normalising relations between different ethnic groups in the region. It includes over 350 videos created by more than 60 authors while focusing solely on YouTube creators who are sharing the same target audiences and speak similar languages and are gathered together into a fluctuating online community of Balkan YouTubers. Even though younger generations migrate to different social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, they remain a part of the same community because regional networks tend to integrate all 'Balkan influencers' operating across different social media platforms and motivate them to collaborate with each other in one way or another.

The issue of YouTubers' contribution to reconciliation in the countries of the former Yugoslavia is under-researched, and this project offers new insights on the practices of reconciliation that are sparked by the new media and are possibly much more effective than many other traditional methods. This research also attempts to point towards the importance of digital ethnography and exploring political practices across internet platforms. Reconciliation

in the countries of former Yugoslavia on YouTube is one possible case study within a much broader phenomenon of practising politics on the internet. Even though there are many research projects dedicated to examining the public discourse on conflicts in former Yugoslavia in the traditional media, there is very little attention on the new media that are crucially influencing younger generations who are not consuming TV, radio or press and their only sources of information are social media. Despite the fact that YouTube is one of the most used social network platforms with over two billion users in 2021[1], there is little research about the political content on YouTube and its implications globally or in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Some examples show how quantitative social science research and digital ethnography can contribute to a better understanding of various political practices on YouTube. For example, Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips have proposed the "supply and demand" framework for analysing politics on YouTube and demonstrated how viewership of far-right videos peaked in 2017 in the US (Munger and Phillips 2019), while Ricke investigated the impact of YouTube on US politics (Ricke 2014). Davor Marko's research analysing extremism online in Serbia is one of the first attempts to bridge the gap and focus on this "under-researched field" (Marko 2019).

For this research, I used digital ethnography as a research methodology because it reveals new insights about practising politics on YouTube in the former Yugoslavia and shows how the new reconciliation narratives are being built within the complex web of interactive social media space. It offers a new approach to ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation with new forms of digital data collection, analysis and research representation (Kozinet 2010). This approach comprises a set of methods that allow for analysing complex social media content that is interactive, allows contributions by the viewers, and expands content that builds up over time. This research focuses on post-Yugoslav influencers who are part of the wider community and use YouTube as their primary social media channel. The aim was to investigate how they contribute to the reconciliation project by stimulating travel and tourism, establishing inter-ethnic friendships, relationships and business partnerships among post-war generations that widely use social media as sources of information. The research encompasses ethnographic analysis of YouTube videos as well as associated content such as comments, likes, statistics and related videos. As Kozinetz remarks, through YouTube videos we can learn about "real concerns, real meanings,

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[1] Statista https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/ (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

real causes, real feelings" and encounter "genuine people" as well as their "consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour" (Kozinetz 2010: 17). This research reveals perhaps some of the revolutionary reconciliation practices in former Yugoslavia that were enabled by social media and the participatory, distanced and scalable sociability that cuts through the traditionally private and public spaces and allows for the creation of new types of communities that are not limited by geographic locations.

2. *From Transitional Justice and Truth-Telling to Hashtag Strategies: Reconciliation Projects in Former Yugoslavia*

Can influencer culture and practices on YouTube be seen as a part of a larger reconciliation project in the region of the Western Balkans? The answer to this question depends on the definition of the concept of reconciliation. Even though it has a long history and roots in Christian ethics, it became prominent in the early 1990s in the context of the shift from apartheid to democracy, and it is usually related to the process of 'transition' and 'democratisation' (Kymlicka, Bashir 2010: 1-5). It is at times limited to the idea of restorative or transitional justice and sometimes seen as a broader concept of securing peace and friendly relations after conflicts (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004: 5). It is often said that there is no 'ultimate universal recipe' for reconciliation (Bashir 2010: 69) or even a clear definition of the concept (Dwyer 1999: 81) and that it is a constructed and contested notion (De Gruchy 2002: 31). The plurality of meanings of the concept of reconciliation allows for various interpretations which suggests that it is a 'dynamic' rather than static term because 'its meaning varies across discursive fields and according to the implicit assumptions associated' with it (Touquet and Vermeersch 2016: 55). From court trials and governmental actions to micro-projects conducted by the NGO sector and cultural exchange on different levels, very different practices are categorised as reconciliation, but the process itself seems to be ongoing and never complete while cutting through multiple dimensions, namely, truth, justice and security (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004: 86).

In former Yugoslavia, the continuous reconciliation is parallel to the endless and precarious transition in the 'desert of post-socialism' as these transformative processes don't have a fixed endpoint and require constant efforts (Horvat and Štiks 2015). Reconciliatory processes included ICTY trials and many other practices, such as storytelling, dialogue, memorialisation, education and projects in the sphere of art and culture, even though there is no systematic evaluation of these practices and their impact (Haider 2021: 1). Transitional

justice has been considered as the main reconciliation mechanism for a long time but has provided only limited results. Even though trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia had a positive impact in punishing war criminals, many studies have shown that they failed to reach reconciliation in the region or that they delayed the process (Strupinskiene 2020; Hehir 2019; Kostovicova and Bicquelet 2018; Stratulat 2017). By 'individualising' the guilt, ICTY trials were supposed to promote reconciliation through prosecution and punishment and prevent revenge among different ethnic communities, but this approach has been criticized for ignoring the social and political reality surrounding the individual cases, for its controversial acquittals and for failing to heal the victims (Touquet and Vermeersch 2016: 59). Some scholars also pointed out that the trials were often viewed as politicised and unfair to some countries and showed how "domestic understanding of international norms (…) fundamentally challenged the principal assumptions behind the global governance of post-conflict reconstruction" (Subotić 2015: 361). However, transitional justice is a more complex process that involves "widespread truth and justice mechanisms, including human rights trials, truth commissions, reparations, lustration, apologies, memorialisation practices, institutional reform as well as local, non-traditional forms of justice", and it has been carried out only partially in former Yugoslavia, while the political elites have not encouraged the reconciliation process vigorously enough to achieve better results (Mastrorocco 2020: 87). On the other hand, civil society organisations across the region have initiated many activities to foster peace, dialogue and cooperation between different ethnic groups. The role of communication and dialogue between ethnic communities has been emphasised as one of the key elements of storytelling and truth-telling aiming to contribute to mutual understanding (Nikolić 2015), but these activities were rooted in civil society and limited to smaller groups. These mechanisms were also criticised because they attempt to reach a 'unitary' truth in divided societies (Haider 2021: 2) and because practices of face-to-face conversations about the past in the Western Balkans have produced opposite effects; instead of breaking down stereotypes and reaching common ground, they reinforced ethnical differences and failed to fulfil the purpose of reconciliation (David 2019: 415).

Studies on the impact of various reconciliation mechanisms have included some of the projects in the sphere of art and culture, mainly the ones instigated by the civil sector organisations (Haider 2021: 3), even though we can speak about many other reconciliatory practices that fall outside the traditional framework or are done in non-conventional ways. Social media strategies that contribute to the reconciliation practices in former Yugoslavia are under-researched even though there are many positive examples worldwide, including

#Let'sTalkUganda campaign which proved that information technology can connect post-conflict communities by motivating them to "share and discuss reconciliatory ideas" (Kasadha 2020: 1). In former Yugoslavia, InstaKosova and InterfaithKosovo campaigns were created with the aim to promote Kosovo reimagined through the eyes of its citizens and foster post-conflict peacebuilding in the country (Brantmeier et al 2020: 77). Even though the impact of this social media campaign has not been assessed, it showed that social media allow the creation of alternative strategies for peacebuilding, reconciliation and digital diplomacy. More recently, the YouTube video 'Hejt Sloveni'[2] as an independent creative project which involved a group of artists from former Yugoslavia has shown how impactful social media can be in the context of reconciliation in the Western Balkans region. Namely, the video addresses the problem of hate speech on social media and parodies the typical insults different ethnic groups say to each other on Twitter, Facebook and other platforms while referencing the anthem of Yugoslavia 'Hej Sloveni'. The video has generated over one million views, provoked many positive commentary videos and gained massive popularity in the traditional media all over the region[3]. While this particular project was created intentionally to contribute to reconciliation in the region by addressing the issues of ethnic hatred among Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, there are also many unintentional reconciliation practices on social media.

The concept of reconciliation can be broadened to include the process of 'transnationalisation', offering "a fresh look at the transformation of the Balkans" while focusing on processes that are tying "heterogeneous Europe into a functioning and workable political and geographic whole through the creation of cross-border linkages that foster cooperation despite persisting national differences" (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2008: 1). This idea suggests we can take reconciliation as a much more inclusive concept that involves various practices aimed at contributing to creating new cultural, political and economic ties in the region. Rather than dwelling on the past, these practices are often future-oriented, economy-driven and avoid the nationalist narratives altogether. Transnational collaborations are restoring broken ties across the region and fostering reconciliation through economic practices which are sometimes focused on the commodification of nostalgic sentiments towards the common past. Branding Yugonostalgia as a commodity is in itself a type of reconciliation

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[2] Buka TV (12.04.2021) *Hejt Sloveni jos ste zivi?*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd7m3jF8NC8&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=166&t=1s.
[3] N1 (13.04.2021) *Licina, Popovic i Severina o hit videu – Hejt Sloveni, jos ste zivi?*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzLNOhqqyO8.

practice fuelled by social media that are feeding on the iconography and ideology of a broken-up country and taking it to viral proportions. It is a part of a cultural and economic project or repackaging of history through music, art, culture and consumer goods created during the Yugoslav times or inspired by the past. It has been recognised that various musical activities following the dissolution of Yugoslavia contributed to reconciliation in the region (Baker 2008: 59) and Yugonostalgia has even been talked about as a form of 'restoration' (Lindstorm 2005) or 'emotional reconciliation' (Petrov 2018). These reconciliatory cultural practices are promoted by social media where they appear in different forms and genres from posting nostalgic photos of old toys, postcards, foods and other products made in Yugoslavia on Facebook and Instagram to creating Yugoslavia-inspired fashion labels such as Yugochic[4] and branding them online. With new post-war generations or 'New Geners' using only social media as sources of information and places for entertainment, social, private and political life (Tapscott 2009: 40), it is important to start analysing these new media along with the influencer culture and assess the impact of new transnational relations to the reconciliation processes in Western Balkans and beyond.

3. Politics on YouTube

A product of the so-called 'screen culture' and a type of 'ephemeral media' (Grainge 2011) that focuses on short forms and is based on user-generated content, YouTube is often perceived as the 'new television' (Burgess & Green 2009) and constitutes a new public space for political debates that are far less structured, orchestrated and censored than the traditional media. It is a much more complex phenomenon than traditional television because it performs 'multiple roles' and simultaneously exists as a 'high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network' (Burgess & Green 2009). As a multifaceted platform that harvests interactive content and motivates creators and viewers to collaborate, it nurtures 'participatory culture' which involves 'meaningful connections' with large communities (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd 2016: 10). Every post on YouTube is a product of collaboration because it not only includes the author's own work but also a number of activities the watchers perform that inevitably become an integral part of the product. In other words, a YouTube post encompasses several elements that are attached to the video (Lange 2014) and can even be read

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[4] Yugochic https://www.instagram.com/loveyugochic/?hl=en.

as a multimodal text that includes ratings, comments, likes, dislikes and other interconnected pieces of information (Benson 2017).

As the leading online platform that allows users to create free accounts and post their own home-produced video content on their own television channels, YouTube allows anyone with a camera and internet access to become a media personality and express their own political opinions. Furthermore, their content is scrutinised by the public as viewers are invited to enter this public arena and express their own support of video content, comment on ideas or show their dissatisfaction and anger towards specific ideas or attitudes imposed by authors. Some authors such as Hediger even argue that YouTube 'introduces a new discipline of politics as performance' because it opens up a new public sphere or 'sub-sphere' which allows anyone to criticize politicians or political ideas through the means of video art, and is, therefore, 'profoundly democratic' as it produces 'a new political aesthetic of accountability' (Hediger 2009). On the other hand, social media have been criticised for undermining democracy precisely because the newly-established public sphere is privately owned (by Google, Facebook and other tech companies) and operates as a 'surveillance capitalism' machine which limits privacy to control data usage while utilising information processing for 'manipulation intended to mould and adjust individual conduct' (Zuboff 2019: 185). The same media that are opening up new public spaces are 'invading' private lives (Busek 2020: 128). In this sense, social media have contributed to the development of 'surveillance-democracy' rather than a free virtual public sphere and real participatory politics (Couldry 2017: 182).

On YouTube and other social media, political opinions are often expressed 'in a language taken directly from popular culture and through mechanisms and practices inspired by participatory culture' (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd 2016: 153). From music videos and various comical montages that ridicule politicians to serious commentaries on various political issues, YouTube allows creating various types of politically engaged content. There are specific genres of YouTube videos that introduce new ways to contribute to political debates. For example, videos that mock politicians such as Donald Trump[5] and Boris Johnson[6] in the western world or Aleksandar Vucic[7] and Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic[8] in the Balkans are perhaps 'utilising

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[5] Yugochic https://www.instagram.com/loveyugochic/?hl=en.
[6] Yugochic https://www.instagram.com/loveyugochic/?hl=en.

[7] Only Fire (27.12.2019) *Kineski tehno (Vucic remix)*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuCa18PKcqQ&t=2s.
[8] Only Fire (20.12.2019) *8000 eura (Kolinda remix)*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKyd1TZqRxQ.

parody' to critique and resist them (West 2019). On the other hand, social media channels and YouTube in particular are also used by radical groups to 'spread their ideology' and disseminate extremist ideas (Marko 2019).

Along with Twitter, Facebook and other social media, YouTube can be a powerful tool for activism as it is a platform for harvesting networks and a cheap, accessible tool for disseminating information or creating election campaigns. Online communities forming on social media can organise themselves to fight for various causes or even initiate big political events such as the Arab Spring in 2011. While Facebook was used to create groups and Twitter for 'real-time organisation and news dissemination', YouTube has mainly been used for 'citizen journalism' and providing evidence of political events that take place in the offline realm (Gerbaudo 2012: 3). More recently, researchers have investigated how social media can be used to mobilise people from different geographic locations because they allow for the creation of more 'transient' connections (Kavada, Poell 2021: 191). Some of the most notable examples include trade union mobilisation in Europe which involved impactful YouTube campaigns (Uba, Jansson 2020: 2). The global 'Make Amazon Pay' campaign signed by over 40 organisations across the world who united to demand that Amazon improve working conditions and ensure job security for their employees, respect workers' universal rights, operate sustainably and pay back to society.[9] Henry Jenkins noted that some examples show how YouTube and other social media can also be used to 'integrate fandom and activism' with the Harry Potter Alliance being one of the key examples because it fostered relationships between Harry Potter fans and various political elites to promote progressive ideas and engage in charity work (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd 2016: 165).

Even though YouTube has been utilised for activism and promotion of various progressive and leftist ideas or campaigns, it has also been used for endorsing radical extremism, hate speech and conspiracy theories because "no single ideological orientation (left, right or centre) has a monopoly on the virtues of a more participatory culture" (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd 2016: 183) and because algorithms favour different types of content depending on the ever-changing parameters set for them. It has been noted that YouTube played a significant role in disseminating 'conspiracy fantasies' (Allington, Buarque, Flores 2021: 79) not just because audiences drawn to these narratives search for information on social rather than traditional media, but also because YouTube sometimes inadvertently promotes this type of

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[9] Make Amazon Pay https://makeamazonpay.com/.

content due to its complex algorithms, despite the efforts to create smarter machine learning mechanisms that can identify and remove extremist content (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, Gandini 2018: 6). The proliferation of radical content on the platform has provoked responses from left-oriented users who have started creating channels dedicated to criticising and challenging the so-called 'alt-right' ideologies (Maddox, Creech 2020: 1). YouTube wars between right and left political ideologies have shown that a social media platform can be a generator of new political subjects. Unlike the traditional media, it gives everyone an opportunity to enter the political arena. Amateurs can create anonymous videos or brand their own personalities to become influencers who can then use the platform to present their own opinions and ideas. Unlike traditional celebrities in the spheres of art, music, film or fashion who only occasionally express their political statements through interviews in traditional media, YouTubers are influential personalities who use social media as platforms where they can express their opinions and communicate with audiences. With a considerable following and impressive online presence, they emerge as important new actors in the new public space of social media.

4. *Influencer Culture, Prosumerism and New Power Relations*

YouTube inevitably changes the global political arena through the so-called 'influencer culture' phenomenon. With its 'broadcast yourself' ideology, this platform allows anyone to start a personal TV channel and convey ideological messages or simply showcase their lifestyle, personal opinions and private life. In addition to the ever-increasing video library of snippets taken from traditional television or hand-made viral videos, there is a realm of content created by superstar video creators who attract large audiences to advertise themselves. In other words, there is a parallel YouTube universe "with its own values and customs, its own incentive structures and market dynamics and its own fully developed celebrity culture that includes gamers, beauty vloggers, musicians, D.I.Y.ers, political commentators, artists and prankers" (Khamis, Ang, Welling 2016: 62).

By using YouTube as a broadcasting social media platform, these content creators are becoming public figures, political actors and self-made entrepreneurs with 'influence' that is measured through the number of subscribers, viewers, comments, likes or dislikes and consequently by their presence in traditional media, involvement in public life and collaborations with companies, organisations or political and governmental institutions. Just like all other social media platforms, YouTube is being used for 'self-branding' or 'personal branding' which 'involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial

gain and/or cultural capital' (Khamis, Ang, Welling 2016: 1). They are building this image purely on their personal traits, everyday habits and lifestyle while portraying themselves as kids next door rather than the untouchable celebrities. As Tapscott notes, new generations required new types of media and a new style of marketing because they were never interested in the traditional media and never trusted traditional marketing; hence the rise of influencer marketing brought about new ways to perpetuate the consumer culture as networked 'new geners' prefer sharing information among each other and picking up recommendations on what to buy, read or listen to, where to travel or even how to think from their peers or their online 'friends' (Tapscott 2009: 192).

While shifting the borderlines between private and public, social media introduces the new 'culture of confession' and techniques of self-exposure which go beyond religious practices, juridical contexts and even the therapy culture (Burkart 2010: 23). Influencers earn their viewership and fandom by revealing their private lives and confessions to their audiences about personal matters and intimate feelings. But while they work on 'digital self-construction' and 'parasocial relationships', they also have distinct 'consumer narratives' (Chen 2014: 2) that are always intertwined with their personal matters and practices of self-exposure. YouTube creators are 'ordinary' kids who influence other 'ordinary' kids rather than celebrities coming from the unattainable world of cinema, theatre, the music industry and other traditional cultural institutions which are exclusive rather than inclusive. To the 'new geners', they are credible and trustworthy because they are accessible and because they belong to the extended circle of online 'friends' (Tapscott 2009: 198).

By branding themselves and commodifying their private lives, influencers exploit YouTube as their advertising platform. YouTube "doubles as an investor who will back videos with advertising revenue, front-page access, and algorithmic preference to boost a video's success and reach" (Sanders, 2020), even though content creators are also finding other ways to utilise their popularity on the platform to gain external sponsorships or advertise their own merchandise or kick-start their careers as writers, musicians, actors, designers, health coaches or chefs. However, YouTube and other social media are not only breaking away from the concept of mass media but are also blurring the borderline between production and consumption. The term 'prosumer' refers to 'free labour' introduced by Web 2.0 epitomised in the 'precarious' work on social media where all the users produce and consume the content at the same time (Gerbaudo 2015: 81; Dyer-Witheford 2015: 92; Duffy et al 2021: 1; Fuchs 2014: 245). Viewers are no longer passive watchers because they are allowed to participate in the production of the content. On YouTube, they can create and publish their own videos, but they

can also participate in other users' content by adding to the number of views, liking, disliking, commenting, sharing or even creating response videos. This is because social media posts can be categorised as unfinished 'multimodal texts' comprised of different elements of content made by multiple authors (Benson 2017: 2). Combining consumer narratives with personal confessions, amateur content creators on YouTube have grown to become influential due to large viewerships. They emerge as new power subjects and new political actors who can use their influence to promote certain ideas, practices or commercial products. When they are gathered in larger online communities, they can create an even greater impact on society by influencing common target audiences.

The Balkan influencer community is linked to regional networks of YouTubers, namely, Balkan Tube Fest and JoomBoos, both established in 2015. These networks were created to gather YouTubers from the region, but also their common audiences. Their online and offline events opened up new possibilities for cultural and economic exchanges, as well as novel reconciliation practices that have been largely neglected and under-researched.

5. *Let's Talk about our 'Balkan Mothers': Reconciliation Narratives of the YouTube Network in Former Yugoslavia*

YouTube influencers from former Yugoslavia are a part of a large online community comprising hundreds of authors who often collaborate closely together as a part of the regional networks such as JoomBoos[10], a YouTube channel and production company based in Croatia that gathers together authors from the region and BalkanTube Fest[11], a regional festival that invites authors from all the countries of former Yugoslavia to live events in Belgrade, Serbia and Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since these authors are a part of the same online community, they share audiences and gather together large numbers of people from the region in both virtual spaces (social networks) and physical spaces when they are invited to participate in YouTube festivals in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries.

These networks have the potential to promote reconciliation in the region precisely because their collaborations rely on common economic interests and personal ties. While building inter-ethnic friendships, they enjoy sponsored parties or tourist trips across the region (and beyond) and gather at regional events where they perform live in front of their audiences

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[10] JoomBoos https://joomboos.24sata.hr/.
[11] BalkanTube Fest https://balkantubefest.rs/.

and meet their viewers in person. Their business is about having fun and sharing it online to create revenue and attract sponsors. And because all parties involved in this business benefit from expanding the target audience, expanding the so-called 'Balkan' network is much more profitable than focusing on smaller local networks within their home countries. Over the past years, this community has found a way to recreate a newly united Yugoslavia in the parallel universe of YouTube. The umbrella word that has emerged as a uniting category for all the influencers from former Yugoslav republics is 'Balkan'. The community needed a word that refers to all of the ethnic groups but escapes the nationalist narratives and avoids references to the history of Yugoslavia. Whether it was chosen coincidentally or deliberately, it spontaneously became a buzzword repeatedly used in different contexts as a uniting factor on YouTube. The main regional event that gathers influencers is called 'Balkan Tube Fest' which has inspired one of the most popular YouTubers to create an unofficial anthem titled 'Balkanska scena' (the Balkan scene) [12]in 2018 which mentions some of the superstar influencers from former Yugoslavia followed by the second version 'Balkanska scena 2'[13] in 2019. Together, the two music videos have generated over 30 million views on YouTube and countless 'reaction' videos on the platform.

The term Balkan has been used by influencers from former Yugoslavia to re-create a common identity that transcends ethnic differences. In their collaborative videos, influencers from different countries come together to talk about their 'Balkan mothers'[14] and 'Balkan friends'[15], comment or sing 'Balkan songs'[16]or taste 'Balkan snacks'[17]. The term is sometimes replaced by the word 'our', and influencers use it to describe habits, personal assets, cultural heritage, territories or commercial goods that come from former Yugoslav countries. For example, a Bosnian YouTuber located in Germany uses the word 'our' to describe a range of products

[12] Baka Prase (14.01.2018) *Baka Prase ft. Lazic – Balkanska scena (official music video)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuTNk0bpHjw.

[13] Baka Prase (09.02.2019) *Baka Prase x Lazic Balkanska scena 2 (official music video)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOyxY0DytcU.

[14] Lea Stankovic (17.03.2018) *Sta nervira mame na Balkanu?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPaQ0_GADUQ&t=57s.

[15] Cale (08.04.2021) *Tipicne balkanske drugarice* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jFfVXEW-JM&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=277.

[16] JoomBoos (27.02.2020) *Pjevamo balkanske pjesme na heliju* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK7zQ10I6K4 .

[17] Nadja Stanojevic (23.06.2018) *Trying Serbian/Balkan Snacks ft. Tenzin* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3pf4Lr252c.

produced across the region that are available in German stores.[18] This example shows how the imaginary category 'Balkan' and the possessive pronoun 'our' in this context spreads from the territory of former Yugoslavia to the diaspora across Europe and the rest of the world.

While using the term Balkan to denote everyone and everything coming from former Yugoslavia could be interpreted as a spontaneous act of reconciliation, it is questionable whether YouTubers from the region are also inadvertently reinforcing the stereotypes that are associated with this multifaceted notion. As Maria Todorova writes, the Balkans is not simply a name or a topological category but also a 'metaphor' which has become a 'pejorative' used to describe 'economically backward and dependent nation-states, striving to modernise' (Todorova 2015: 85). Historically, the notion of the 'Balkan Peninsula' was coined by the Prussian geographer Johan August Zeune in 1808 used to describe a 'distinct geographical and cultural area', but terms 'La Turquie d'Europe' used by the Ottomans in Western Europe and Austrian geologist Ami Boué also has a political connotation as well as the term 'South-Eastern Europe' even though it was used by the linguists first (Mishkova 2019: 7). Crucially, the key trait of the Balkans has been 'underdevelopment' and 'backwardness' (Mishkova 2019: 116) primarily because it presupposes the binary distinction between civilisation and barbarianism and defines this cultural and geographic region as an opposition to the developed west (Bjelić 2002:7).

One of the most popular topics on YouTube has been the stereotype of 'Balkan mothers'. Starting from the assumption that there is a common Balkan identity, and that there are no significant differences in upbringing in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia or Montenegro, they are subtly sending a message to their young viewers that they share a common culture despite the differences stemming from ethnic or religious views. In their own words, the Balkan mothers are 'queens'[19]who can also be 'irritating'[20] and they are all 'the

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[18] Juka (17.01.2019) *Najbolja trgovina u Njemackoj, nasi proizvodi!!!*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW_BP7i_QnE&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa
mUoC4ICTH&index=244.

[19] Naida Bojnakova (23.02.2018) *Kraljice majke sa Balkana*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ0t84qC7GE&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa
mUoC4ICTH&index=275.
[20] Andrija Jo (28.01.2018) *Iritantne stvari koje rade majke sa Balkana*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiJ5o3lZxNs&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNam
UoC4ICTH&index=259.

same'[21], different to all 'other mothers'[22]. With the focus on ridiculing the Balkan mentality, it seems that YouTubers from former Yugoslavia are inadvertently engaged with self-stereotyping while recreating a group identity through the Balkan metaphor. In this context, Balkan is 'the other' as a territorial and psychological category sharply contrasted to 'rest of the world'[23]. The non-Balkan world is most likely the western world as local influencers continuously reference or mimic English-speaking YouTubers from the UK, US and other countries.

Stripped of the majority of its geographical, political and cultural meanings, the notion of 'Balkan' has been shaped to become an empty umbrella term or a common reference for influencers and their audiences from the former Yugoslav republic who speak similar languages and can understand each other. While many countries of the geographic region such as Romania, Bulgaria or Albania are excluded, members of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin diaspora scattered all around the world are a part of it because they attract the same audience and are using similar languages. Authors from Macedonia and Slovenia are only partially included in the community, probably because the majority of viewers across former Yugoslavia do not understand their native languages. In this sense, Balkan is no longer a physical location, but a common denominator that ties together members of various ethnic groups in an online space which unlike the territories of broken up Yugoslavia has no unsettled border issues or frozen conflicts. Social media allow for the creation of inclusive virtual communities and territories that are not necessarily tied to specific geographical localities. In this case, influencers restructure the physical borders of former Yugoslavia while also redefining the Balkans as a locality and metaphor.

The mere use of the term 'Balkans' in this way can be interpreted as an attempt to practice reconciliation in the region, but there are also many other ways influencers are trying to rebuild broken ties and normalise interethnic relations in former Yugoslavia. While mimicking some of the famous YouTubers from the UK and the US, Balkan influencers have been working on various collaborative projects, including filming in pairs or groups comprised of representatives from different former Yugoslav republics. One of the YouTube genres that

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[21] Nika Ilčić (17.03.2018) *Stvari koje nerviraju mame na Balkanu*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ao4Q3nv2J4&t=0s.
[22] Andrija Jo (03.07.2017) *Majke sa Balkana VS Ostale Majke*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k1vmCW2H24.
[23] Andrija Jo (03.07.2017) *Majke sa Balkana VS Ostale Majke*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k1vmCW2H24.

has emerged from their collaborations is the famous word guessing game between influencers from different countries. While making each other guess the meaning of the words in Serbian[24], Croatian[25], Bosnian[26] or Macedonian[27], they emphasize both the similarities and differences in languages while motivating viewers to learn about them.

These collaboration videos are also portraying interethnic friendships between influencers from the region. While their primary activity might be earning revenue and attracting sponsorships, they are also building interpersonal relationships across former Yugoslavia and bonding in front of the cameras is often endearing to the audience as well. They routinely film their private[28] and business[29] visits to other countries in the region. Every regional convention such as Balkan Tube Fest is followed by a series of vlogs[30] from all of the participants who are filming their performances[31] as well as their encounters with other YouTubers from other countries[32]. Occasional sponsored tourist adventures[33] also involve

[24] JoomBoos (23.08.2020.) *Pogadjamo rijeci na cirilici! Marko Cuccurin i Cofi*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e6ZKq2I1fI.
[25] Choda (10.12.2018.) *Pogadjamo hrvatsko srpske reci / w Fabniksx*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wecmHHVy8xU.
[26] Baka Prase (21.05.2021.) *Devojka mi govori perverzne reci na Bosanskom (18+)*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXc_S5N9GE0 .
[27] Choda (27.05.2021.) *Pogadjamo srpsko makedonske reci/w Tasko*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-Y54yWYjUY.
[28] Lea Stankovic (13.06.2019.) *Vlog - Sta smo radile u Dubrovniku?*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2RGVd0CN00&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa
mUoC4ICTH&index=28&t=13s.
[29] Nedim (25.11.2016.) *Prelijep dan u Beogradu*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEnboAzJ-
tk&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=139.
[30] Jana Dacovic (05.10.2016.) *Balkan Tube Fest Vlog*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTAv8lndxyI&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNam
UoC4ICTH&index=57.
[31] Nadja Stanojevic (01.10.2019) *BALKAN TUBE FEST | BEOGRAD 2019*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykOiVawVf0o&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa
mUoC4ICTH&index=66.

[32] Ruzica Rupic (28.11.2018.) *BALKAN TUBE FEST SARAJEVO PART 1*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-
cuptuvNhOA&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=48.
[33] Jana Dacovic (19.10.2019.) *Spa vikend u Sloveniji*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKjZ-
IIHlCA&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=135.

groups of influencers travelling to various destinations including a holiday in Egypt in the summer of 2021[34] after a long period of separation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a result, perhaps without previous contemplation, influencers from former Yugoslavia are sending a message that relations between different ethnic groups are already normalised. Rather than discussing ethnic conflicts in the region and cultural differences, they leave them behind and focus on having fun together and practising reconciliation instead of talking about it. They film their journeys to other countries[35] and only occasionally discuss the issues of safety[36] with the aim to reassure their audiences that it is perfectly safe to travel from Serbia to Croatia or Bosnia and vice versa. This is palpable in many vlog videos that document journeys across former Yugoslavia including individual holidays, private visits, joint adventures of influencers from the region or YouTube parties or events organised by companies that use influencer marketing to promote their products and services. Implicitly or explicitly, they are sending a message that it is safe to travel to other countries[37] while elaborating on their positive experiences[38].

During the Covid-19 pandemic, travelling across the region has been challenging, but influencers tried to find ways to overcome obstacles and visit each other[39] or participate in the JoomBoos network's programs that aimed to promote Balkan YouTubers and TikTokers alike. After the first major earthquake which hit the capital city of Croatia, Zagreb, influencers from the region sent messages of support to their Croatian peers[40]. During the pandemic, JoomBoos continued to connect influencers from the region by publishing content that included

[34] Davor Gerbus (02.06.2021.) *POMIRILI SMO SE (Egipat dan 1, Ruzin koncert)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_FBxpJyf28&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNam UoC4ICTH&index=251&t=475s.

[35] ANNA (22.06.2019.) *Na moru 3 dana | Twerkujem?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-yfTNBmti4&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=29&t=487s.

[36] Zeljko Petricevic (06.01.2020.) *MUKBANG STORY TIME | Da li su Srbi bezbedni u Splitu?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKkrT5dYGIg.

[37] Ana Marija & Sasa (28.08.2019.) Letovanje 2019/Hrvatska Dubrovnik https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4i0q5rdC5A.

[38] Ana Marija & Sasa (21. 08. 2018.) HRVATSKA UTISCI https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lW_IxwO10xQ&t=1332s.

[39] Baka Prase (26.11.2020) *Baka Prase x Jala x Buba – snimamo pesmu *hit godine** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVkiWAilD8c&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa mUoC4ICTH&index=4.

[40] JoomBoos (30.12.2020.) *Cijela regija uz Hrvatsku: Anna, Kimi, Omco i mnogi drugi poslali poruke podrške* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8saLDJSpl-A&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=4&t=27s.

contributions of YouTubers and TikTokers from different countries in the region or commentaries on their work. In spring 2020 when travelling between states was not allowed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they created a series of cartoons featuring characters inspired by the most popular regional YouTubers who sent their voice recordings to be included in these cartoons.[41] Additionally, they also uploaded videos of influencers from across the region filmed in their homes during the lockdown.[42]

And while some videos emphasise ethnicities to portray normalised friendships and travelling across the region such as the one titled 'A Bosnian and a Serb in Croatia'[43], others oversee the differences and send more subtle messages about interethnic relations such as a 2016 video titled 'all YouTubers in one hotel'[44]. Even when influencers engage in the so-called YouTube dramas which involve multiple conversational videos in which they argue with each other, they strive to emphasize that their disagreements are purely personal and not related to their ethnic origins. When one of the famous Serbian YouTuber Baka Prase engaged in a 'drama' with the Bosnian YouTuber Amir Hadzic[45] and subsequently with the Macedonian YouTuber Ritko,[46] audiences accused him of ethnic hatred in comments, but he responded with statements that these fights were not related to ethnicity, religion, nationality or race.

The research shows that reconciliation narratives and practices can be both explicit and implicit. The vast majority of analysed videos do not explicitly mention interethnic conflicts but rather focus on showing how relations between different ethnic groups can be or already are 'normal'. Furthermore, collaborations between influencers from former Yugoslavia have

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[41] JoomBoos (09.05.2021.) *Baka Prase je poslao viruse! Ekskurzija u karanteni #3* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUNHUaUsWog&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpY NamUoC4ICTH&index=209.

[42] JoomBoos (29.03.2020*.) Reagiram na Baka Prase Korona | xniks2x* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azxa_G9DHes&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa mUoC4ICTH&index=212.

[43] Juka (29.11.2018.) *Bosanac i Srbin u Hrvatskoj – Infogamer 2018 vlog* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNnqNJPf1Fo&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa mUoC4ICTH&index=71.

[44] Andrija Jo (05.10.2021*.) Svi jutjuberi u jednom hotelu | 2 Dana pre BTF-a* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=- osRxJdJkQw&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNamUoC4ICTH&index=98.

[45] Baka Prase (19.04.2017) *OSTAVIO ME JE DECKO – Odgovor idiotima* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9bh8RBAFkI&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNam UoC4ICTH&index=87.

[46] Lazarov (18.12.2020.) *Za Baka Prase sme Severna Makedonija! * ocajno** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FxKbidXxK0&list=PLZXr2RpggkrxnOKNZrcRpYNa mUoC4ICTH&index=80.

resulted in specific Balkan-themed genres of YouTube videos including word guessing games, Balkan food tasting videos or drama sketches that parody Balkan mentality. Since these videos are purposely made to attract viewers from different countries in the region, they often generate large numbers of views. For example, a collaboration video created by influencers from Serbia and Croatia themed around guessing meanings of Serbian and Croatian words generated more than 1.5 million views.[47] JoomBoos has also produced a music video 'Generacija Z'[48] which has become one of the unofficial anthems of Balkan influencers. The lyrics were written by Slaven Beric and Fil Tilen, and the song talks about the generations 'after the war' who 'do not hate' anyone and are 'flying from Belgrade to Hvar'. While emphasising generational differences and insisting on their common Balkan culture, influencers from Former Yugoslavia send subtle messages that promote reconciliation among the younger generations.

YouTube and TikTok videos have hundreds of thousands or sometimes even millions of views which indicates they may have a significant influence on public opinion and, consequently, make impactful reconciliation practices. However, detailed statistical data on demographics is not publicly available on YouTube, and ethnographic research without further data analysis is not enough to assess the effect of these reconciliation practices. Research results indicate that influencers who belong to the Balkan network collaborate, socialise and disseminate reconciliation narratives while portraying interethnic cooperation and friendships as normalised and desirable. Results also show that there is a generation gap between the influencers and their audiences who still rely on traditional media and a younger population who consume only content from social media. Authors of analysed videos as well as their subscribers and followers are mainly young people who don't have direct experience of the wars that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. While YouTube does not provide direct insight into the demographics of their audience, influencers themselves occasionally reveal this information through their own social media content. Given that publicly available statistical data are limited, this is just a hypothetical conclusion, and it indicates that reconciliation narratives and practices exercised by the influencers from former Yugoslavia are most likely to impact younger generations who were born after the nineties.

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[47] CHODA (10.12.2018) Pogadjamo Srpsko-Hrvatske reci 2/w xfabniksx (resio?) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4P8yRsw3pM&t=48s.
[48] JoomBoos (02.05.2019) JoomBoos ft. Baka Prase - Generacija Z (Offical Music Video) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5MCuBjKGFQ.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that YouTube influencers from former Yugoslav countries contribute to reconciliation in the region by offering new narratives, establishing new bonds and forms of cooperation that primarily influence younger audiences who have not experienced the wars in the nineties and the breakup of the country. Building on the idea of transnationalism in the Balkans (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2008), this research offers a different perspective on reconciliation and examines online spaces that transcend physical borders and ethnic divisions. It investigates how these new communities assembled on social media are redefining the topological, historical and cultural concept of the Balkans to create a new metaphor that reunites Yugoslavs scattered across the region and the rest of the world. While leaving conflicts and ethnic hatred in the past, these communities focus primarily on the economic benefits of inter-ethnic collaborations and interpersonal relations.

Even though YouTube is a platform that allows the dissemination of all types of content including hate speech and nationalism, it is undeniable that there is a large network of influencers in the region who are consciously or unconsciously promoting ideas of normalisation of inter-ethnic relations. They strive to portray interactions between members of different ethnic and religious groups from former Yugoslav countries as if they are already normalised. Inadvertently, they problematize the discourse that is dominant in the offline world of traditional media and politics which focuses primarily on failed transitional justice projects and the limited impact of various NGO initiatives. Rather than dealing with conflicts and history, social media influencers are focusing on the future while promoting new economic practices that are created by and fostered by social media. They work with companies as well as individuals from different countries in the region, which automatically brings them larger audiences, more views, more clients and more substantial earnings. And because they belong to a broader regional network, they promote reconciliation both explicitly by engaging in political debates, and implicitly through entertaining videos showing them traveling to neighbouring countries and socialising with members of other ethnic groups.

Even though the idea of new reconciliation on social media fuels optimistic prospects for the future, it is questionable whether practicing politics within online platforms truly can be viewed as democratic or in fact the opposite because influencer culture is already a product

of the surveillance machine which feeds on personal data and reduces the realms of private and public to the point of nonexistence. This unconventional and unintentional reconciliation project is also problematic because of the tendency to 'trivialize political discourses' on social media (Cleary 2020: 227) and replace meaningful concepts with empty notions. While the Balkan metaphor successfully works as a unifying factor on YouTube, it is actually an empty signifier stripped of its topological, historic and cultural meanings. Its definitions are provisional and futile, offering no solid ground for building a common identity. Furthermore, influencers who are congregating into larger regional networks are merely following the algorithmic ultimatum to generate more views and more revenue, and in this sense "identity formation is controlled by the forces of consumerism and technology, leaving little room for an 'inner' Self to develop independently" (Skelly 2017: 188).

Nevertheless, this research shows how the new technologies, new media and new participatory culture brought about new modes of communication and interaction along with innovative reconciliation practices that follow the algorithmic logic of social networks. The impact of influencer culture to reconciliation in the region is, to some extent, measurable through the basic YouTube statistics, i.e., numbers of followers, views, comments and likes. However, making a thorough assessment of their contribution would require access to additional data and further analyses using a combination of methods. While this ethnographic research offers an insight into novel practices and narratives that have been neglected by social sciences, it also serves as a base for future research projects that would focus on other aspects of reconciliation or use other methodological approaches to assess the impact of social media on inter-ethnic relations in former Yugoslavia.

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