Some scholars draw comparisons between the EU crisis and the Yugoslav crisis that heralded the brutal wars of the 1990s. Of course, there are many differences, beginning with the fact that Yugoslavia was a single state, that it faced the collapse of the socialist one-party system, and that colossal global realignments were taking place in the wake of the Cold War. Still, with regard to the economic and political crisis in the EU, to internal divisions, to the emergence of nationalism and sovereignism, and to the lack of vision and a certain mutual fatigue, the Yugoslav case offers important insights. In the following I will take a close look at the role of historiography in Yugoslavia, both during the Yugoslav crises and after the disintegration of the union, and ask for the lessons it offers, also for doing European history in the present.

Contemporary research reveals a substantial responsibility of historians and historiography for the Yugoslav drama. First of all, historians had not highlighted the essential problems nor asked crucial questions while the Yugoslav union existed. When the political crisis broke out in the Yugoslav Federation, nationalist leaders heavily invoked national historiographies in the ideological destruction of the common state, and laid the psychological groundwork for the war. That is why the Yugoslav experience is a good lesson to be studied and from which to learn, especially as we recognise that
nationalist narratives in today’s EU employ experiences from the past to cast doubt on the purpose of unity. I would like to discuss four basic aspects.

Historiography as a means of legitimation

Using historical research as a means to legitimise unity was one of the greatest mistakes of Yugoslav historiography. While Yugoslavia existed (1918-1991), historians wrote works of synthetic history aimed at emphasising unity and drawing positive examples from the common experience.\(^5\) It should be borne in mind that the two Yugoslav states that emerged after the First and Second World War included peoples that had themselves fought on opposite sides. Both Yugoslavias were reconciliation states, which predisposed historians to evade painful topics, especially ethnic war crimes. The myth of unity was created. History was presented as a determinant that from the arrival of South Slavs to the Balkans unavoidably led to the creation of Yugoslavia, as a clear and undying goal of “small nations that fought heroically against great empires to realise their historical goal.”\(^6\) All the separate struggles for national freedom were portrayed as simultaneously struggles for unification in a common state.

To meet this imposed political goal, historiography was necessarily selective, everything that was “inconvenient” was thrown out, and elements suitable for the required picture were emphasised. This way, deep questions were neglected and the politics of unity imposed desirable answers. The public understood that these synthetic works of Yugoslav history were an official, imposed, obligatory, but not realistic, portrayal of the past, which is why they never played a significant integrative role. In such a framework, historiography excluded multiple perspectives, and made even initiating a discussion on different interpretations of particularly painful and controversial events difficult. Therefore, the differences in national narratives remained unexamined. Yugoslav citizens did not know how the “other side” experienced the same event, which during the dissolution of Yugoslavia reinforced the impression that there was “our” and “your” ethnic truth. This was just a step away from the idea that there is some “true history” that is avoided in order to maintain unity.

There is no imposed history of Europe. But still the Yugoslav case points European historians towards the dangers of using history as a means of legitimisation. There is an impression that large synthetic works of European history have too often been characterised by a lack of multiple perspectives and comparative analysis, that consensus narratives have been sought at the expense of conflicting historical evidence. Comparative studies that include multiple perspectives of different cultures
of memory and different interpretations of sensitive events are therefore an essential approach to making European history more participatory, inclusive, and open to debate, while also creating a deeper mutual understanding.

Common history as a collection of national histories

In Yugoslavia, the commonly narrated histories of the country, despite the required and imposed unity, remained merely collections of case studies of national histories, which apparently existed side by side, lacking reciprocity and mutual connection, creating the impression that they were almost contactless. Each looked out from its own national bubble. Thus they not only failed to see the “other” or their mutual connections, but also failed to notice the integrality of the common country, which is why its meaning and significance became less and less clear. Common interests remained on the surface as a coated layer beneath which deeply rooted national and nationalist narratives remained. At levels below the “prescribed” commonality, however, differences in interpretations were not only significant, but, as comparative research now clearly shows, the “prescribed” commonality was used to lay blame on the other, to construct and play up profound differences, to portray “us”, whoever that “us” might be as better than others, to turn each “us” into greater victims.\(^7\)

The unity constructed in this manner became the main trigger of nationalism. As the political and economic crisis deepened, unity became a burdensome structure, something that “prevents us from being who we are”, an obstacle, a compulsion, something that hinders and does not allow us to “have control over ourselves”.\(^8\) Thus, the historiographically unfounded unity prepared the groundwork for sovereignists, who effortlessly dismantled the common narrative and imposed their particular narrative.

To critically engage with narratives of unity and to seriously consider bilateral, multilateral or regional perspectives, is one of the most important tasks of European historiography today. Using the methods of entangled histories or \textit{histoire croisée} to approach fundamental issues, historians would help to create a better understanding of differences and similarities – and with it of the whole.

Ethnocentrism as a brake
Without in-depth insights into common history, without comparison, *histoire croisée*, without interweaving multiple perspectives, national history cannot be studied or understood properly. Without innovative methodologies and comparisons, Yugoslav historiography did not develop adequately in terms of methodology. As a result it soon took an ethnocentric approach, which almost without exception led to a distorted understanding of the past, primarily to self-victimisation or self-aggrandisement.\(^5\) Without a common framework, each group could appear to be better than others, which was again a step towards the idea of each group's uniqueness, exceptionality, each group's incomparable course. There is no place for unity in such a narrative. It was, as Amos Oz puts it, just a contest of who would be the greatest victim, as self-victimisation is the best instrument of nationalism.\(^10\) Self-victimisation is the shortest path to the homogenisation of the nation, and the victim status also provides an indulgence, a form of forgiveness in advance, for all future actions. The victim cannot be guilty. The Yugoslav case unequivocally confirms that without a common history, national history remains limited, and vice versa, that without asking deep historical questions about one's own national history, unity remains superficial.

A comparison of cultures of remembrance at the European level would reveal what national histories emphasise when they interpret certain events, processes, or phenomena from the past. We would see the manner in which national victories, defeats, heroes, and victims are discussed. This would help us grasp the existence and depth of nationalist interpretations of history, which could be used to create a list of enemies through the image of the “other”. The emergence of strong sovereignist and identity movements within the EU demonstrates the strength of self-victimising narratives and suggests that European historiographic traditions may not have paid enough attention to ethnocentric interpretations of the past, nor offered a methodological approach that could initiate discussion and offer a way out of conscious self-isolation.

The problems of mental mapping

In Yugoslav historiography, the dominant position in histories that claimed to be universal was taken by the larger constituent nations, while the smaller nations were considered ornaments, which could be allowed a limited number of pages based on percentage of population, as a sort of appendix. Apart from the fact that the “little ones” were constantly placed in a subordinate position, over time they became invisible, and therefore superfluous. The “big ones” were not interested in the history of the “little
ones”. Consequently, not much was known about them, so when crises emerged in those parts of the country, there were no adequate responses.

When the Yugoslav crisis began and when the divisions emerged between the big and small, rich and poor, north and south, east and west, some began to claim that the common country could do without the “small” ones. That some were faster and some slower, that there are different speeds, that it was important for the big ones to be kept and pulled together, and that if a wagon could not follow this train, it should be let go, and it was hardly anyone would even notice. In addition to that, when it came to interpretation of the past, despite a very strong ideology of unity and a powerful centralised state, there was always visible rivalry and competition among the “big ones”, which prevented raising questions that would reveal the deep problems of those societies, but also of the common state.

Even a cursory glance at synthetic works of European historiography reveals that they often marginalised the European “periphery”, thus strengthening the centripetal forces that drive identitarian discourses. Consequently, nationalist discourses of “small” nations gained ground, armed with the argument of not being accepted by the “centre”, of being less important and unequal, which reinforced Eurosceptic narratives. Therefore, we should work on syntheses that present European history phenomenologically and thematically, which would contribute to a better understanding of integrative and disintegrative processes.

Responsibility of historiography for the 1990 Balkan wars

These examples illustrate some of the profound problems of Yugoslav historiography while the country existed. And then came the crisis which brought a historical boom. Shortly after Tito’s death, from the early 1980s, room was created for nationalist and sovereignist concepts that sought to dismantle the common country and create independent states. For these ideological visions to be translated into concrete politics, and later into military action, it was necessary to stir up negative emotions, to create enmity between neighboring peoples, to incite fear and a sense of threat from the common state, which was increasingly presented as a threat to national identity. Historiography has proven to be a most reliable ally in that first stage, the stage of war of narratives. Historians were eager to help by turning into spokespersons for new, mostly fabricated, fake news from the past. Historians, like pop stars, made appearances on prime time TV shows and revealed to their nations the “secret” histories that were
supposedly not allowed to be told because of, as they called it, the imposed Yugoslav unity. Mass graves from previous conflicts, were first virtually and later physically excavated, letting out the ghosts to incite new conflicts. History was abused to the point of brutality, creating a paranoid image of the past that served as a mechanism of intimidation. The public ate up those new images, passions grew. The constructed fear of the “other” fed the desire not only for revenge but also for preventive war. The Yugoslav war began in the domain of history.

The case of Yugoslav historiography shows how dangerous it can be to “handle” history irresponsibly. Not only are common subjects not examined, but because sensitive points from the past are sidestepped, especially the deepest and most dangerous phenomena, history became a weapon. Just as Yugoslav historiography refused to see nationalist separatisms destroying the common country, Yugoslav historians refused to see the deep problems of Yugoslav society, including its democratic deficits, its insufficient plural political culture, the obstacles to modernisation, the patriarchal model of national identity, and the heroic memorial culture. Since these issues were insufficiently analysed, the responsibility for all the problems was placed on the common country, which was portrayed as the main culprit for everything. This strengthened the belief that all problems would disappear in the newly created nation-states. That did not happen, and most of the new countries faced the same historically inherited problems after the collapse of Yugoslavia as before. Today, they are mostly dysfunctional, still democratically deficient, and economically unsuccessful. This has provoked widespread discontent among the citizens and, among other things, has led to mass emigration. If historiographers had done their job and raised sensitive, but fundamental, questions, perhaps expectations would have been more realistic and more would have been done to prevent new and overcome historic problems.

These Yugoslav experiences can be alarming. They point to a task no less important for European historiographies: to raise fundamental questions, to apply comparative history, to rethink mental maps, and to avoid letting the smaller, poorer, peripheral nation fall out of focus. This is one of the reasons why “surprises” often arise on the political level. First of all, the Yugoslav wars demonstrated that, with the exception of German and Austrian historiography, other European historiographic traditions did not detect the Balkans in their mental mapping. They failed to consider the Balkan region. It was the appendix, that troublemaking backyard, as the Balkanist discourse goes, but the causes of those troubles were not seriously examined. This was partly due to the concentration on the “big ones” and partly because of prejudice and preconceptions that the problems of the “periphery” were not European problems. The Balkans were often absent in universal European histories, which is why when the Yugoslav wars began in the 1990s, there was not enough expert knowledge to conceive of appropriate responses to the
crisis. This led directly to a series of inadequate responses, which extended the war, and resulted in vast human suffering. Europe paid dearly for that mental mapping and that lack of interest.

Or take another example. The appeal of the *Mitteleuropa* myth reinforced the belief that the former Eastern Bloc countries would effortlessly return to their European democratic heritage after they were liberated from Soviet occupation. This obstructed the perception of deeper non-democratic layers in political culture and led to the victory of a number of populist and authoritarian regimes that do not respect the basic values of the EU and are blocking the EU today. Still another example is Brexit, which showed that the relationship between Brussels and London was insufficiently studied and inadequately understood. The same dynamic led to the negative image of the EU that has long been fed to the public on the island, accentuating English nationalism and imperial resentment. These are sensitive issues that could have damaged the image of the European community at the surface level. Had they been documented and examined, however, Brexit would have been less of a surprise and the response to the Brexit crisis could have been better prepared. Here I will only briefly mention Trump and everyone’s astonishment with him winning the election in 2016, and the great support he received in the 2020 elections. Had the divisions of American society and the ideology that justified those divisions, which have been apparent for decades, been studied with more care, Trump’s political success not have come as such a shock and the situation would have been better understood.

Changing of the framework?

What other Balkan experiences could help European historiography? An important lesson may be that changing the framework not only changes the context, sharpening the picture both on the individual and societal level, but it also gives a different perspective. The history of Yugoslavia and the Balkans can be instructive in setting up a European framework. We, from within, saw Yugoslavia and the Balkans through our national lenses, while the few European historians who have studied this part of the continent mostly saw Yugoslavia and Southeast Europe as a whole. Their research provided essential insights. This demonstrates that when you pull the camera back, looking from the “outside” helps you see the whole picture more clearly. This corresponds with my experience of teaching global history (the course I teach at the University of Belgrade), which helped me see Europe “from the outside” and as a whole. Although I had previously taught global history “country by country”, first the big ones, then the smaller ones, etc., my experience with changing the lens and pulling the camera.
back, framing the shot from the outside, helps me and my students avoid the frog’s-eye view of a nation that unavoidably sets barriers and sees the picture only through its own zoom lens.

Balkan experiences as motivation?

There are also very specific shortcomings of European historiography when we study it from the Balkan angle. We from “small-language nations” are used to knowing, in addition to English, at least one other “big” language, if not more. This has always allowed us to read other European historiographies in the original, but also to be amazed at how weak the links between them are: how they do not correspond with one another, how poorly they read each other, how much is missing in the footnotes. Even the greatest non-English historiographies, French and German, exchange surprisingly little of their knowledge. I believe that setting up a special fund for translating critical studies with far reaching historiographic results into English would encourage that cooperation.

We from the “back yard” have had the advantage of always linking up our histories to the European context, from the transfer of different concepts, to cultural, political, economic and other types of influence. Without this reciprocity and entanglement, we would understand the processes of our national histories in a different way. When we read the histories of individual European countries, especially the larger ones, that framework of entanglement is often absent, because it is probably assumed that they themselves are that framework, which is why they do not see deep connections and influences. Funds that would help research in-depth issues and connections would certainly help connect European historians, and they would also strengthen comparative and transnational studies. The digitisation of archival material, of newspapers and periodicals from the time of mass literacy in the 19th century – well under way for some European countries, but not yet for others – could be among the first steps towards comparative studies, without which there cannot be a mirror in which we can see ourselves.

Today, 25 years after the Balkan wars, historians from the post-Yugoslav countries are collaborating on joint projects more regularly than when the union existed. We realised that we cannot understand ourselves without others, that our similarities are much greater than our differences, that without a comparative approach, many events in national history remain unclear. We are seeking to discover deep processes that can explain the causes of the crises we have gone through. After the bloody wars and the genocide committed in the wars of the 1990s to separate the Yugoslav peoples, today
large groups of historians work together in order to understand how all this was possible, how the people who created the ideologies and movements that organised the war also won the elections. The great differences in the interpretations of sensitive events that still exist are resolved by incorporating multiple perspectives in our research. We are very aware of the responsibility of the “official” narrative and the consensus on the past which, through insincere unity, paved the way to separatism. It is clear to us that we will not reach an “agreement” on controversial issues,

\[\text{wie es eigentlich gewesen},\]

neither do we think that would be a good and useful path. What is needed is the opening of all, even the most sensitive issues, and their presentation from multiple perspectives to the public to initiate an open dialogue, so we can understand the position of the “other”.\[^{17}\] Thanks to these new approaches and, above all, the common understanding that we will not be able to move forward without it, we can engage with the most difficult issues of mutual crimes, for example, in the Second World War and in the wars of the 1990s. Couldn’t we have done that before the gory disintegration of the country? Our hope remains that European historians, with the help of projects such as this one, will play the role that Yugoslavia missed.

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17. Latinka Perović et al. (eds.), *Yugoslavia from a Historical Perspective*, Belgrade 2017. [P]