

## Correspondence: A Response to Brana Mijatović

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An article by Brana Mijatović, “(Com)Passionately Political: Music of Djordje Balašević,” appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of this journal. In it, she described, in some detail, the significance of Yugoslav/Serbian pop singer Djordje Balašević, with particular reference to the recent crises in former Yugoslavia and Serbia. More accurately, this essay constitutes a not even thinly veiled political polemic. In this sense, this work can be seen as emblematic of a widespread but far from universal view expressed by a significant number of young, largely urban, and educated Serbs deeply influenced by their strong attraction to the West and its perceived affluence and glamor. For them, most of Serbia’s current problems are attributed to Milošević, traditionalism, and nationalism. Like them, the author conveniently fails, even in passing, to consider other explanations and antecedents for the numerous tragedies that have characterized the recent history of former Yugoslavia.

In this paper, Mijatović leaves little doubt that she is expressing her own ideological position through the vehicle of Balašević, a position that is most clearly postulated in a single paragraph (p. 94). Here she cites a litany of sins entirely attributable to the Milošević regime: The suppression of political opposition, fraudulent elections, the destruction of independent media, responsibility for the [civil] wars in Yugoslavia, and economic ruin and poverty, among others. While Milošević can be faulted in many ways, the assertion of his overwhelming responsibility for Serbia’s woes can be disputed by a considerable body of evidence. However, due to the lack of space provided here, I will deal only with the economy, and very briefly.

It can be argued that measures taken by the Milošević regime in respect to the economy during that period when he was in power were not the cause of the impoverishment of Serbia, but were, for the most part, responsive to an externally imposed crisis. For instance, Yugoslavia’s heavy borrowing from the West, beginning as early as the late 1960’s, established conditions for the destruction of the country’s socialist economic system. As has been the case with other debtor nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank demanded that the Yugoslavs undertake disastrous reforms, which included massive cuts in social spending and the closing of

industries regarded as “unprofitable.” This, in turn, resulted in massive unemployment, which was only temporarily mitigated by the exodus of guest workers to Germany. This all occurred before Milošević came to power. Similarly, the economic war waged by the United States against the former Yugoslavia from the 1980’s onwards only intensified the destruction of Yugoslavia’s unique form of socialism. The unambiguous goal of this campaign was the imposition of a so-called free-market economy and the opening up of Yugoslavia for the exploitation of its resources and the creation of a cheap labor pool. Serbia and Montenegro, the two republics in which socialism was most deeply entrenched, became the primary targets of Western hostility. The final blow to the economy of what has been termed “rump Yugoslavia” were the sanctions instigated by the United States and several other Western countries during the Yugoslav civil wars. Thus, it is no surprise that during this period, as well as at present, “the gray market” cited by Mijatović has flourished.

It is disturbing enough that many opinion makers and academics in our country, to say nothing of the American media in general, have so uncritically and unambiguously demonized Milošević and the Serbs as wholly responsible for the tragedies in former Yugoslavia. However, it is even more remarkable that Mijatović lauds Balašević for having produced “cathartic effects by enabling his audience to experience deeply felt and yet often repressed emotions of grief, guilt, and shame” (p. 101). By this, the author implicitly calls upon the reader to embrace the concept of unique Serbian responsibility for the disasters that have characterized the past fourteen years in the history of Yugoslavia. Such a single-dimensional view, excluding other alternatives, contributes little to our understanding of the origins of these conflicts and the uses and misuses of power.