

Correspondence: A Response to Andrei Simić

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I wrote a dissertation on the topic of music and politics in Serbia, and there I discuss at length the complexities and issues involved in the demise of former Yugoslavia, including intra-national, international, and economic causes of the problems. I also lived under the Milošević regime for several years before coming to the United States, and thus experienced many of the things I wrote about.

However, in such a short article it was not possible to address all the complexities and issues involved in “our understanding of the origins of these conflicts,” nor was it the intention to do so. My article was about the way a popular musician had responded to the crisis and how it resonated with a certain segment of the population of Serbia. It was not about the history of conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Furthermore, the editors explicitly asked me to limit my discussion of politics to the bare minimum, since this special volume was on music and dance. Thus, the few historical facts I did mention were intended to serve as a context for the issues that Balašević critiques in his songs.

Professor Simić seriously misunderstands an important matter that I want to clarify here. Milošević was the leader of Serbia and, however you want to look at it, is responsible in great part (as I say in the text, he was “one of the key entities” not “the only one”) for what happened, as a result of his decisions, on the national and international levels, and on the social and the economic levels. The Serbs, as a nation, however, do not bare the same responsibility, and this was what this article tried to bring to the foreground.

It was neither my intention nor my explicit wish to “call 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.” Quite the opposite. My hope was that this article would show the extent and range of Serbian critical attitudes towards the wars and the government, ones that were very different from those reported in many

Western media, where Serbs, on the whole, were described as completely unaware of what was going on, completely supportive of the wars, and completely uncritical of the decisions Milošević made over the years.

The issue of responsibility was actually important for many people who lived in the country at that time, and opening up a discussion on that topic, as well as providing a range of questions and opinions, did not automatically exclude the responsibility of others [outside Serbia] for what happened. These discussions illustrated the political self-awareness of ordinary citizens, and that is one important fact I wanted to emphasize. I also mentioned the complexity of that subject and illustrated this with several different views. I concluded that Balašević’s song encourages a rethinking of personal engagement with political activism, which is, in my opinion, a worthwhile aspiration for a mature, politically aware individual in any society.

This response strikes me as a transparent attempt to discredit someone with political views different from its author. I wonder who was the template for such uninformed and inaccurate comments about my thoughts, ideas, and motivations on a variety of subjects, including, most remarkably, “the West” and the tradition. While Milošević himself used this approach in Serbia whenever he came across opinions he didn’t like, in this country such tactics serve only to undermine the writer’s intent and credibility.