

Introduction: revisiting the 1980s through a generation lens

Education and schooling stand on the basis of achievements of modern science, and particularly on the basis of Marxism, as the foundation of scientific socialism, which serves to train workers for the working process, self-government and their education in the light of the victories of the socialist revolution, socialist ethics, self-management democracy, socialist patriotism, brotherhood and unity and equality of nations and nationalities and socialist internationalism.

*The Constitution of the Socialist Federal
Republic of Yugoslavia, 1974*

Post-Yugoslav culture has been fascinated by the generational story of those who left their mark on the last Yugoslav decade. An impressive number of documentary films, books, exhibitions and plays have been produced since the early 2000s which in one way or the other deal with the popular youth culture of the last Yugoslav decade and with the generation which experienced the violent dissolution of the state in their late twenties and early- to mid-thirties.¹ Authored by the protagonists themselves or by individuals who witnessed the events, this explosion of interest in a particular generational story and subsequently in Yugoslav late socialist culture, demonstrate a need for self-reflexivity that could be interpreted as an urge to reflect back on the last Yugoslav decade and its legacies and make sense of the social rupture caused by the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia.²

The last Yugoslav decade saw a challenge to established norms and practices in late Yugoslav politics, media and culture unfolding within the institutional youth sphere. This book addresses the experiences and work of the activists and the more prominent representatives of the last Yugoslav generation within the broad framework of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia [SSOJ]; *Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije* / *Сојуз на социјалистичката младина на Југославија* / *Звеза социјалистичне младине Југославије* / *Lidhja e rinisë socialiste të Jugosllavisë*

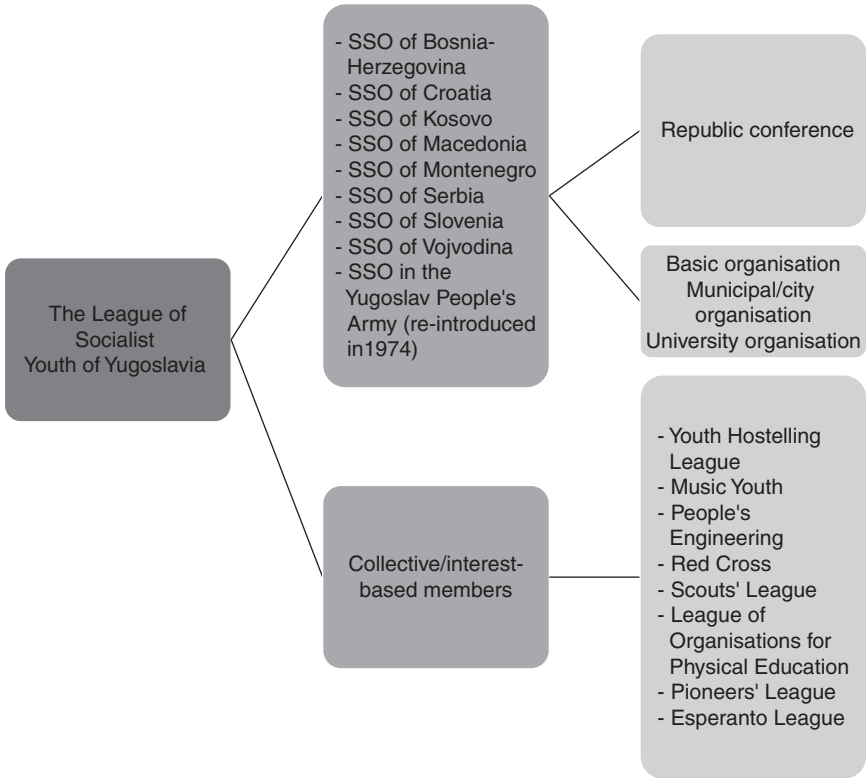


Figure 1 Structure of the SSOJ

(see Figure 1). By combining oral history interviews and archival and other primary material the book seeks to map both the institutional youth sphere and the lived histories of the last Yugoslav generation. The generational lens is used to provide new insights into the decline of socialism and the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia. It shows that the youth's challenge to the socialism of the older generation was an important feature of 1980s Yugoslavia and that there was a deep commitment to the reforming (and not the dismantling) of the federation, based both on leftist and liberal principles.

The book contributes to the literature on late Cold War challenges to state socialism, in that it examines a case in which nearly all of the dissenting political and cultural projects were contained within institutional structures. Amidst a rich body of literature dealing with late socialist Yugoslavia and its eventual demise, few depart from the realm of high politics and even fewer scrutinise the ways the multi-level crisis affected a particular group – in this case the youth and young adults – and how it shaped the group's understanding of the state and

of its role in it. The book attempts to blur the line between what is considered 'alternative', 'oppositional' versus 'institutional' or 'official', by shedding light on the intricacies in the youth's interaction with the state and on the inner dynamics of the wide youth infrastructure, which was a product of the particular Yugoslav institutional arrangements and the doctrine of self-management. Hence, it maintains that the League of Socialist Youth still represented a location for real meaningful politics. Consequently, research focusing less on dissidence and resistance and more on adaptation within existing institutional structures could provide new insights and open up new venues within the field of socialist studies. Furthermore, the book seeks to deconstruct labels such as 'anti-Yugoslav' and contextualise particular acts, demands and initiatives.

Scholarly literature on Yugoslavia views the 1980s primarily as the prelude to the violent dissolution of the country and has generally dealt with the end of Yugoslavia as a *fait accompli*. The political trajectories of the major actors in the break-up, as well as the major political events, are well mapped and have been subject of a range of studies and approaches,³ as scholars were initially interested in uncovering the roots of the demise of the country. However, few academic works have shifted the focus away from the institutional/political sphere and attempted to explore the inner dynamics of parts of 1980s Yugoslav society on its own terms without necessarily framing it within the dissolution narrative.⁴ Indeed, the existence of alternatives and other attempts at rethinking the Yugoslav framework have been overshadowed by an imperative to explain the violent break-up and establish the major reasons behind it. However, more recently the field has begun to expand beyond the dissolution/ethno-nationalism paradigm, although many authors still choose to analyse only one of the former Yugoslav republics or regions.⁵

This is one of the first attempts to explore this alternative world of 1980s Yugoslavia through a generational lens, taking the variety of political and cultural projects that sought to redefine – but not destroy – the Yugoslav project. Focusing on the politically and culturally prominent amongst this younger generation, the book addresses how the Yugoslav youth in the 1980s attempted to rearticulate, question and rethink Yugoslav socialism and the very notion of Yugoslavism. Contestation and negotiation were intricately mixed, as the Yugoslav youth elite of the 1980s essentially strove to decouple Yugoslavism and dogmatic socialism. They framed their artistic, media or political activism as targeting certain prescribed norms, particular malfunctions of the system, or the older elite – rather than as strictly anti-institutional or anti-Yugoslav.

While acknowledging the essential fact that there were prominent differences in social status, education, ethnic/religious belonging, gender and/or profession, the book departs from the idea that this generation was marked in different ways by the 'historical trauma' of the Yugoslav collapse and the subsequent

wars, while in their earlier or later formative years they were all exposed to the omnipresent discourse and reality of a multi-level crisis. Broadly, the book explores the last Yugoslav generation during the last Yugoslav decade 1981–91 within the broad framework of the institutional youth realm – the extended network of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia (SSOJ). It focuses on individuals born between 1954 and 1969, who belonged in the category of youth (16–28) at some point during the 1980s, born to parents who belonged to the ‘first Yugoslav generation’. Although the last Yugoslav generation is approached as a socio-political generation that spans several biological generations, the members of which experienced the 1991–92 historical juncture as young adults, it is evident that there are two distinct cohorts within it: the older born in the mid- to late-1950s and the younger born after 1960.

The individuals who in the 1980s were involved at different levels in the youth organisation constitute an undeniably heterogeneous group. Yet, two more or less clearly delineated groups emerge: one constituted by the youth functionaries, which at that time were openly criticised for the numerous privileges they enjoyed, and the other camp of more non-conformist, intellectually oriented youngsters who were part of the wide range of related youth organisations and bodies (magazines, newspapers, cultural clubs and centres, publishing and research centres, etc.). Many of those who held important positions within the youth organisation would pursue political careers after 1991. Although the principal carrier of the dissolution and the post-socialist transition was the ‘post-war generation’ of older socialist elites, there were some of the younger youth functionaries who joined the reformed communists (in Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro) or entered politics through newly-established parties (such as in Slovenia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina). The ‘progressive’ stream, which both within the youth organisation and in culture embraced different liberal, civic ideas or articulated apolitical voices of rebelliousness and anti-war activism, generally remained marginal and sidelined during and after the dissolution. Nevertheless, they were visible in the political youth sphere at the end of the 1980s and especially prominent in the realm of 1980s youth media and culture.

The book also seeks to provide a pan-Yugoslav perspective. Most work which has dealt with late socialist culture has done so through case studies of particular republics – an approach which has often been the product of a post-socialist and post-Yugoslav retrospective determinism, or, indeed, ‘methodological nationalism’.⁶ The observation that ‘The social sciences have become obsessed with describing processes within nation-state boundaries as contrasted with those outside, and have correspondingly lost sight of the connections between such nationally defined territories’ might not ring true for all area studies, but it is a valid observation in the context of Yugoslav studies. Research which has focused on youth politics and culture in late socialist Yugoslavia has tended to

concentrate on Slovenia,⁷ generally internalising the narrative of the developed, democratic North and the under-developed, conservative South and the peculiarity of the Slovenian case in comparison to the other parts of Yugoslavia. As it has been argued, ‘Not only a gap was widening in Yugoslavia between the north, which was slowly entering the post-industrial age, and the south, which was remaining or drifting back into premodern times, but a similar gap was emerging between the urbanites and the peasants, workers, and petty bureaucrats’.⁸ By taking a broader frame, the book engages with important questions about the evolution of Yugoslav youth culture and politics as a whole in the 1980s. It addresses, for instance, the extent to which there was a fragmentation of the institutional youth realm at the end of the decade along national/republican lines. Did political and cultural divides within republics, or links across republican borders, remain equally important? Did the *de facto* confederal institutional set-up of socialist Yugoslavia, which meant that most of the youth did not for the most part engage with the federal level, imply that republican centres remained heavily bounded spaces for activism, and that attempts at rethinking Yugoslav politics, culture and identity were always limited by the reality of the particular republic? Or, did trans-republican reformist or liberal networks, which cut across those ethno-national divisions, remain important? Acts of ‘trans-national cross-fertilisation’⁹ have generally been overlooked or over-shadowed by an emphasis on growing friction and inability to reach any type of consensus in the 1980s. The same is valid for the various articulations of Yugoslavism in a context where the Yugoslav identification was politically and practically discouraged. Hence, the book explores the idea that comparisons across republican lines and a pan-Yugoslav approach enables us to trace the mutual influences, interactions and debates in the youth sphere seen through its wide institutional network of the SSOJ, especially in the light of the various attempts at youth reform across the different federal units.

Adopting a generational lens gives fresh perspectives on the decline of state socialism, as in the realm of post-socialist studies there has been an increased interest in examining the rise and fall of socialism in Eastern Europe in generational terms.¹⁰ By analysing a particular social group, it is possible to view the exit from socialism in other ways and challenge the teleological accounts of socialism’s decline and Yugoslavia’s collapse. More specifically, it enables us to examine the experience of crisis. This book embeds the ‘last Yugoslav generation’ within the discourse of crisis that marked Yugoslav late socialism. It designates three prominent generational markers of the ‘crisis generation’ (*generacija krize*) – the multi-level economic and political crisis, internationalism/Europeanism, and a new understanding of Yugoslavism as citizenship in its dimensions of rights and identity.¹¹ A 1986 federal research survey on Yugoslav youth noted that Yugoslav society was

witnessing the proliferation of a ‘non-classical political generation’ [*neklasična politička generacija*], ‘a generation which desires and brings along changes’,¹² while a 1988 study referred to it as a ‘new political generation’.¹³ This underpins the notion that a generation which rose to prominence as the new decade and the post-Tito era were dawning had been socialised differently and was bound to bring change in advance of that actually materialising. I map the first level – the generation of the crisis – as something that occurred as a process of external labeling, the second level – Europeanism/internationalism – as a generational consciousness, a dominant way of self-narration and self-perception within European/global frameworks, and finally the third level – layered Yugoslavism – intricately related to the second as a form of self-definition, i.e. what I observe as this generation’s new ‘sense of citizenship’¹⁴ and differently conceptualised activism which sought to rearticulate socialism and Yugoslavism. Hence, the first generational pillar as identified here, which revolves around the notion of ‘crisis’, reflects the dominant scholarly/sociological observations with regard to the Yugoslav youth dating from the period under scrutiny, i.e. the 1980s; the second generational pillar relates to this generation’s own sense of Europeanism/cosmopolitanism/internationalism as conveyed at the time by its representatives and as construed by its members *a posteriori* in the post-socialist period; the third generational pillar complements the previous two with my own reading of this generation’s new forms of youth activism and engagement with/perception of the state.

The citizenship lens is employed because it is useful for accounting for social and political activism and its relation to space in late socialism, as it elucidates one significant dimension of the youth’s engagement with the state in the 1980s – negotiation, pragmatism and challenge from within. The debates concerning the reform and future of Yugoslav socialism which unfolded in the political realm in the 1980s have been mapped by numerous scholars who chose to engage with the political history of late socialist Yugoslavia. The book seeks to elucidate both the similarities and the differences between the debates on the future of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav socialism in the youth and the political realms. Essentially, it addresses the specificities of what was seen as a generational challenge to an ‘ageing’ socialist system embodied by an older elite.

As I explore below, the idea that this challenge to established notions of the Yugoslav project was generational was noted at the time both by youth and external observers. For instance, the idea of a new generation that would bring forward significant changes was current in contemporary international and domestic political/scholarly discourse. As the 1980 UNESCO report on youth noted:

Finally, it should be recalled that the youth of the 1980s are the children of the youth of the 1960s ... The new generation faces a considerable challenge in carrying their parents' hopes and dreams into an economically inhospitable future. Many argue that the new generation is more realistic and less utopian than the generation that came before it. It may be suggested, however, that the sobering tasks and even the defeats that confronted their parents never eclipsed a belief in real progress towards justice, equality and peace.¹⁵

New ideas about the socialist project, about the extent of media freedoms, and notions of Yugoslavism were for the most part concentrated in critiques advanced by a younger age cohort who had been socialised in the 1960s and 1970s, and within an institutional space devoted to socialisation of the young – the SSOJ. The book maintains that a generational approach provides new insights into the processes of remaking/rethinking and decline in late socialism. The younger generation was not central to negotiating the dissolution, yet some of its representatives were at the forefront of trying to rethink Yugoslav socialist federalism. The stretching of the boundaries of media freedom – a phenomenon led by the youth press – is one among many examples of the inner dynamics of transformation of late socialist Yugoslav society led by a younger cohort. Furthermore, a generational lens provides insight into new forms of political expression in the 1980s, some of which found shelter within the different parts of the youth organisation and (re)shaped youth journalism and the youth press as a space for debate and contention.

In this sense, this book draws upon the work by Karl Mannheim, who advanced new understandings of how generational cohorts form. His seminal essay posits generation as 'nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related "age groups" embedded in a historical-social process'.¹⁶ Later studies, however, proposed that the problem of generations could be summarised as one of the 'linkage of personal time (the life cycle) and social time (history)',¹⁷ i.e. that one sociological (or what one may call historical) generation may in fact encompass many biological generations, since age groups¹⁸ are not to be identified with generations. Given that 'generation' is a subject of study in history, sociology, anthropology and politics, it is often an elusive, slippery concept that requires more precise definition depending on the context of analysis.

Few scholars have drawn on Mannheim's insights – whether explicitly or implicitly – in framing Yugoslav history in generational terms. From this outlook, socialist Yugoslavia becomes a generational project of a combined revolutionary and partisan generation – the older cohort (born at the end of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century) which led the underground communist movement in the interwar period and the revolutionary liberation struggle during the Second World War and drafted the socio-political contours of the new

federation; and the younger cohort of revolutionaries who joined the partisan guerillas led by Tito as youths. Although few of them were still active in the late Yugoslav political scene in the 1980s (such as Minister of Defence and first general of the army Veljko Kadijević, born 1925), the positions of power were in general held by the 'post-war generation', that is the first Yugoslav generation of individuals who did not have any conscious personal experience of the Second World War. Indeed, what has been referred to as 'a generational shift within the regional party leaderships'¹⁹ took place gradually in the second half of the 1980s in different federal units as well as at the level of federal leadership. Beside Slovenian Milan Kučan (born 1941), Azem Vllasi (born 1948) also took the helm of the League of Communists of Kosovo in 1986, and Slobodan Milošević (born 1941) took over the Serbian Party branch in 1987. A number of scholars have attempted to build these generational frames into their understanding of politics in the 1980s. As Lenard Cohen observed, for example:

The ascendancy of the post-partisan elite generation to the highest level of the political hierarchy received striking recognition at the 13th Congress of the Yugoslav League of Communists in June 1986. Thus, while 58 percent of the former Central Committee elected in 1982 had participated in the National Liberation War, this was true of only 24 percent of the 1986 Committee ... Forty years after founding the communist regime, Tito's 'younger' comrades-in-arms were relinquishing the country's highest positions to a new political generation.²⁰

In addition, Cohen underlined 'the juxtaposition of different generational cohorts, with different formative experiences and different levels and types of skills'.²¹ Nebojša Vladislavljević also used these generational frames to make sense of political change in the 1980s:

Members of the younger generation had very different formative experiences, values and skills from the old guard, which inevitably affected the general direction of policy, relations within the political class and state-society relations. Unlike members of the old guard, most were well educated, with a background in administration, business or local politics ... priorities gradually shifted toward economic reform, more open intra-party debates, the relaxation of repression and more autonomy for low- and middle-ranking party and state officials.²²

Nevertheless, in the Yugoslav political and public/media scene in the second half of the 1980s, three different political generations were present, more often than not with different and conflicting visions. Although there was a shared consensus that the Yugoslav socialist framework needed reform, consensus on the way it should be achieved, the scope of reform and the particulars of it could not be reached. This study seeks to offer insight into the most junior of the three

generations, which was at the forefront of trying to rethink the Yugoslav project, attempted to reform certain aspects of the system and believed in its reformability much longer than members of a young cohort in other parts of Eastern Europe. By ushering in new grievances, envisaging new solutions and a new understanding of the polity the previous two generations had built, it searched for both liberal and leftist models to do so. Thus, the book seeks to reinforce the idea that alternatives did exist in the 1980s.

The book does not overlook the diversity of outlooks within a particular generation, i.e. what Mannheim referred to as ‘generational units’.²³ The ensuing chapters look both at the divisive and the cohesive points among the youth functionaries, the young journalists, the youth in the alternative culture circles, or the army youth. In this sense, the idea of generation does not simply describe an age cohort shaped by similar life experiences, but also the emergence of a consciousness of belonging to an age-determined group, even amongst groups with seemingly different political or social views. Here the book draws on more recent constructivist work in generation studies, which explores the construction of the feeling of belonging to a generation within groups over time to a far greater degree than Mannheim attempted.²⁴

Second, a generational lens is important because *generational discourse* was a central feature of public and political understandings of youth, as well as of the Yugoslav research on youth in general. In the 1980s, this was constructed by academic and public discourse as a ‘crisis generation’, or, indeed, as a generation that will bring changes.²⁵ It is important to note that the generational lens was appropriated by many, if not all, scholarly studies on the youth in socialist Yugoslavia – the terms used were (*mlada*) *generacija* or *pokoljenje*. It has been observed that the generation concept was one of the preferred analytical lenses among Yugoslav scholars because it was understood as oppositional to the Marxist class paradigm.²⁶ Even the 1986 all-Yugoslav youth research clearly referred to Mannheim’s terminology and stated as one of its goals the description of the ‘characteristics of the different *generation units* which might exist within this generation’.²⁷ Nevertheless, few have taken up this conceptual apparatus to analyse the story of post-Second World War Yugoslavia. Many studies which have dealt with youth and generation originate from the socialist period. Yugoslav sociologist Djordjije Uskoković,²⁸ for instance, argued that one can observe the existence of three dominant generations in socialist Yugoslavia: the war generation – which took part in the anti-fascist revolution and began the rebuilding of the state; the post-war generation, which mainly came of age in the 1950s and was modelling self-management according to its own interests – which is also the generation that, because of the general lack of educated professional cadres after the Second World War, managed to establish itself in all of the key positions in the spheres of politics, economy and culture. Finally, according to Uskoković, there

is the 'young' generation – coming of age in the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, facing the contradictions between the proclaimed values and norms and the day-to-day reality they faced.

Third, this generational discourse has also continued in popular memory, and continues to shape the way in which people from this generation understand the 1980s and the (post-)socialist decline.²⁹ This is largely due to the impressive cultural production and creative output from young Yugoslavs in their late teens or in their twenties throughout the 1980s. This generational self-identification has persisted mainly because the majority of those cultural products have preserved their prominence in the post-socialist context (in particular in music/popular culture, sport and cinematography) and the actors continued their careers within the same spheres after the Yugoslav dissolution. Hence, a generational lens is chosen to deconstruct a generation which has featured prominently in post-Yugoslav music and culture, as well as in order to demonstrate the effect of the systemic crisis of the 1980s on a particular group which contributed to many of the debates, but did not have a real stake in the resolution of the Yugoslav crisis. Post-Yugoslav works have sought to find 'our generation' within late Yugoslav literature, music, media, sport, politics or theatre.³⁰ This was a generational consciousness solidified for some by the experience of war, the break-up of Yugoslavia and the loss of geopolitical and international status. The violent break-up of Yugoslavia also had a lot to do with the veneration and even the mythologisation of the Yugoslav 'new wave' music scene, for example. It should be noted that some are reluctant to use or appropriate the generational mould, or are prone to refuse it outright. The scepticism towards identifying as a part of a generation is generally a result of a deep sense of disappointment and bitterness towards the eruption of violence and the subsequent destruction of the state, often related to the political or even personal splits between former colleagues and friends. The concept of 'generation' has been also rejected by many of those who became successful nationalist or anti-communist figures, and who did not wish to define themselves according to their cultural or political projects of the 1980s.

Finally, embarking on a generational study makes a pan-Yugoslav approach both inevitable and viable. Work conducted in the post-Yugoslav period has tended to focus on the experience of particular republics or groups: using the generational frame enables us to tell a pan-Yugoslav story. This does not necessarily mean a homogenisation of a diverse set of experiences – rather, the concept of 'generation' can be used to address how far activists worked across national boundaries as young people, or how they interacted within the institutional youth sphere, noting both the divides and connections that emerged. The youth, of course, was a vast heterogeneous category that the system identified as a potential guarantee for its future preservation and, consequently, invested a lot