



Remembering the “Embargo Cake”: The Legacy of Hyperinflation and the UN Sanctions in Serbia

Research Article

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Remembering the “Embargo Cake:” The Legacy of Hyperinflation and the UN Sanctions in Serbia

Ivana Bajić-Hajduković*

The extensive pauperisation of the population in Serbia in the early 1990s, caused by the economic crisis and the UN sanctions, had a tremendous impact on the people’s everyday diet. Many basic, locally produced foods became unavailable as food retailers severely limited their stock to save it from depreciation caused by hyperinflation. Following the introduction of the UN embargo, official trade came to a halt and imported foods disappeared from shops. Limited stock of basic foods, such as flour, sugar, cooking oil, white bread and milk, was supplied through state-owned food retailers, but these were rationed and difficult to obtain. However, food scarcity in early-1990s Serbia boosted the population’s resourcefulness and creativity on various levels, resulting in increased solidarity, support networks, barter, smuggling and a return to cooking recipes from the period of the Second World War. Survival during hyperinflation and the UN embargo was predicated on transmission of knowledge from the pre-industrial period, suggesting that this was possible mainly because of the simultaneous coexistence of the pre-industrial and industrial periods in Yugoslavia. This article will analyse strategies and key actors in the process of sourcing, procuring and preparing food under these socio-economic circumstances.¹

Keywords: food, hyperinflation, social networks, solidarity, Serbia

Introduction

On 30 May 1992, the United Nations imposed sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) after the UN Security Council determined that the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in other parts of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) constituted a threat to international peace.² Resolution 757 banned all international trade with Serbia and Montenegro, air travel, maintenance of aircraft, sports exchanges,

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² United Nations Security Council. 1996. *Letter dated 24 September 1996 from the chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 724 (1991) concerning Yugoslavia addressed to the president of the Security Council*. New York: United Nations, 24 September 1996.

scientific and technical cooperation, cultural exchanges and official travel. These sanctions were intended to put pressure on Serbian President Slobodan Milošević to stop support for Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In November 1995, following the signing of the peace agreement in Dayton, Ohio, the UN suspended the embargo against Serbia and Montenegro.³ However, the UN sanctions were not fully lifted until 2001 after Milošević’s extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

The UN sanctions had a devastating effect on the Serbian economy, which was already troubled by pre-existing economic difficulties and macroeconomic mismanagement.⁴ The war - triggered by the dissolution of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and by the state’s robbery of citizens by confiscating deposits in private bank accounts - contributed to complete economic meltdown and hyperinflation.⁵ Three months after the imposition of the UN sanctions, industrial production fell by 40 per cent.⁶ At the end of 1992, the inflation rate in Serbia and Montenegro reached 19,810 per cent. This trend continued in 1993, when Serbia set a record with one of the highest hyperinflation rates in history: 313 million per cent (monthly inflation rate). The average monthly salary at the end of 1993 amounted to USD 15.⁷ As a consequence of the UN embargo, industrial plants were either closed or operated at minimum capacity. By the end of 1993, 1.3 million workers were on paid leave of absence - not working, but receiving salaries - while 750,000 were unemployed.⁸ Hyperinflation in Serbia lasted for 25 months between 1992 and 1994 and as such was the third longest period of hyperinflation in history.⁹ In January 1994, hyperinflation in Serbia peaked at 5,578,000,000,000,000,000 per cent, or 113 per cent daily.¹⁰ Prices doubled on a daily - sometimes even hourly - basis, and empty shops became a regular sight.

This article analyses coping strategies and consequences of this unprecedented hyperinflation and the UN embargo. It has to be emphasised that this article does not make a causal relation between hyperinflation and the embargo. The food production and consumption chain were affected by both the hyperinflation and the UN sanctions, and as such these two phenomena were impossible to separate methodologically for research purposes. For this reason only, the two issues are studied together in this article. It is based on extensive ethnographic research in Belgrade carried out on several occasions between 2005 and 2014, and draws on participant observation and life histories recorded during these periods. In addition, as a native researcher who lived in Belgrade

³ Delević, Milica. 1998. *Economic Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Tool: The Case of Yugoslavia*. *The International Journal of Peace Studies* 3(1). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

⁴ Delević, *Economic Sanctions*.

⁵ Dinkić, Mladjan. 1996. *Ekonomija destrukcije: velika pljačka naroda*. Beograd: Stubovi kulture.

⁶ Stamenković, Stojan, Aleksandra Pošarac. (eds.). 1994. *Makroekonomska stabilizacija: Alternativni pristup. Macroeconomic stabilisation: An Alternative approach*. Beograd: Institut ekonomskih nauka. 21.

⁷ Stamenković, *Makroekonomska stabilizacija*, 29.

⁸ Stamenković, *Makroekonomska stabilizacija*, 29.

⁹ Nicaragua had the longest hyperinflation period of 48 months (1987-1991), followed by Russia (1921-1924) with 26 months. National Bank of Serbia: [Hyperinflation](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

¹⁰ Hungary recorded the highest amount of hyperinflation in history between April 1945 and July 1946, with rates of 19,800 per cent per month. National Bank of Serbia. [Hyperinflation](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

during the 1990s, many of my insights were rooted in personal experience that was subsequently informed and enriched by discussions with my research participants. The research on which this article is based mostly involved participants who lived in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. This article has a strong urban focus; although it is representative of much of urban Serbia, it does not purport to present a comprehensive overview of the situation in the whole of Serbia.

In the next section, I will discuss food consumption patterns in the years leading up to the fall of Yugoslavia and the economic crisis in Serbia contemporaneous with the UN embargo. Following this, I will analyse the dietary changes that ensued after the rise of hyperinflation. New recipes and ways of sourcing food will be discussed along with the social implications of procuring information about accessible food stocks. Creative ways of getting hold of food, whether growing one's own, foraging wild foods, smuggling or trading on the black market, flourished during the period of hyperinflation, leaving long-lasting consequences that will be analysed in the concluding section of the article.

1. Food consumption and diet before the UN sanctions

In the years preceding the fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe, Serbia experienced an unprecedented rise of Western consumer culture. The first McDonald's restaurant in Central and Southeastern Europe opened in Belgrade in 1988.¹¹ The popularity of this first McDonald's was such that in 1989 it hit record sales, becoming the busiest McDonald's in the world and serving more than two million customers that year.¹² The tremendous success of the first McDonald's in this part of the world prompted the company to open another branch on Terazije, one of the busiest streets in the centre of Belgrade. In 1990, the latter McDonald's became the first in the world to serve more than three million customers (3,585,554).¹³ It set another world record on 12 March 1991, when it served 16,823 customers in a single day. In the same year, the Terazije McDonald's once again came close to serving almost three million people in Belgrade.¹⁴ Similar to the phenomenon of McDonald's in Beijing,¹⁵ the popularity of this fast-food restaurant had more to do with the symbolic nature of tasting the "West" and "America" than with the actual appeal of the food or the prices, as these were quite expensive for the majority of Belgrade's citizens in the early 1990s.

The increased consumption of Western foods went beyond McDonald's restaurants in Belgrade. As a result of the political rift between former Yugoslav republics (Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia), in October 1990 the Serbian government introduced its own tax politics independent of federal (Yugoslav) revenue

¹¹ It is interesting to note here that the first McDonald's in Italy opened in Rome in 1986, only two years before the restaurant entered the market in communist Yugoslavia. McDonald's. [*Istorija: McDonalds's u svetu*](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

¹² McDonald's. [*Istorija: McDonalds's u svetu*](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

¹³ McDonald's. [*Istorija: McDonalds's u svetu*](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

¹⁴ McDonald's. [*Istorija: McDonalds's u svetu*](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

¹⁵ Yan, Yunxiang. 2006. McDonald's in Beijing: The localization of Americana, in *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, edited by Watson, James L. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 213-217.

and customs.¹⁶ This allowed the government to decide its own customs and tax politics and to control prices on its territory, as well as which goods to import and export. Consequently, the prices of imported products fell overnight, reflecting the affordability of foreign foods.¹⁷ Local newspapers reported a sale of 35 kilos of Dutch cheese in one day at a New Belgrade grocery shop; the shop owner told newspapers that it had previously taken a week to sell this amount of cheese.¹⁸ Foreign cheese, Mars, Snickers and Twix chocolate bars and Milka chocolates suddenly became not only available, but affordable to consumers in Belgrade.

The differences in food consumption between Belgrade and the rest of Serbia were also documented in sociological research about the standard of living in Serbia. This research studied all social classes (“social layers”, as the original research termed it) in Serbia in the late 1980s and revealed that Belgrade residents had a much better diet compared with the rest of Serbia.¹⁹ The research accounted for differences in consumption between the managerial class or layer (*rukovodioci*), private entrepreneurs (*privatnici*), middle class (*srednji sloj*) and working class (*radnička klasa*). The social structure of Belgrade residents included fewer working-class consumers and more people belonging to other layers, which resulted in a better diet compared to the rest of Serbia. Almost half of Belgrade families regularly consumed meat, fruit and vegetables, and around two-thirds consumed milk and dairy products on a regular basis in the late 1980s.²⁰ With the onset of war in former Yugoslavia and the subsequent introduction of the UN embargo followed by hyperinflation, these food consumption patterns were completely changed, as we will see in the next section.

2. Bread and dripping revisited

With the economic crisis in the 1990s, consumption patterns changed once more. People quickly had to adapt their diets yet again to new conditions; new, but also often older, methods of preparing food, as well as recipes with fewer and cheaper ingredients, found their way back to everyday use. Instead of using cooking oil for shallow frying, women returned to the times of their mothers and grandmothers and started cooking with lard if they had countryside connections to supply them. As a byproduct of pig rearing, lard was easily found in the countryside. Many residents of urban centres had relatives in the countryside who reared one or two pigs for families in town, thereby securing cheaper homemade meat products, and lard.

The rapid industrialisation in former Yugoslavia after the Second World War championed sunflower oil over lard, which was more popular at the time. During the 1960s and 1970s, lard increasingly became a sign of unsophisticated

¹⁶ Žarković, Dragan, et al. 1990. Srpska ruka u srpskom džepu. [Serbian hand in Serbian pocket] *Vreme*, 29 October 1990, 5-8.

¹⁷ Yan, *McDonald's in Beijing*.

¹⁸ Yan, *McDonald's in Beijing*.

¹⁹ Bogdanović, Marija. *Materijalni standard društvenih slojeva*, in *Srbija krajem osamdesetih – sociološko istraživanje društvenih nejednakosti i neusklađenosti*, [Material standard of social layers, in Serbia in the late eighties – sociological research into social inequalities and discrepancies], edited by Popović, Mihajlo et al. Beograd: Institut za sociološka istraživanja Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu, 241-75, 251.

²⁰ Bogdanović, *Materijalni standard*, 249.

and unhealthy cooking, while sunflower oil symbolised a modern and more health-conscious diet.²¹ While the production and distribution of sunflower oil was state-regulated, lard production was not in the hands of the state. Lard's return to regular use in the early 1990s suggested that people in Belgrade drew on knowledge from their pre-industrialised pasts in order to surmount the challenges sanctions had imposed on their usual diets. This shift from oil to lard consumption in the early 1990s was not only a sign of economic crisis, but also resembled a journey through time, going back half a century to the period of food scarcity during the Second World War and severe rationing after the War. Lard was used not just for cooking, but also as a spread on bread, as in *mast i leba*, the equivalent of bread and dripping in the UK. *Mast i leba* was a well-known staple amongst the generations who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s without the butter, margarine or cheese spreads that were later commonly used. Members of the postwar generations vividly remembered a childhood staple: a slice of bread topped with a thick layer of lard and sprinkled with salt and paprika.

Half a century later, *mast i leba* once again became a common breakfast for many. Several of my female research participants recalled having “communal breakfast” with colleagues at work during hyperinflation, whereby someone would bring homemade bread, someone else homemade yogurt, and yet another would bring lard for *mast i leba*. The difference this time was that bread was mostly homemade because its stock was heavily limited. Women who took to making bread at home in the early 1990s did not do so through choice or because they loved to bake, but because flour was one of very few foodstuffs one could get hold of. As one of my informants, Lola, a landscape architect, recalled:

“We had a 50-kilo sack of flour in the pantry, and I baked three times a day, as there was hardly anything else to eat: bread for breakfast, pies for lunch and buns for dinner, day after day, month after month. In the first six months after the end of hyperinflation, I refused to turn on the oven - I was so fed up with baking.”

This was a very different phenomenon that could not be compared to the revival of home baking in the West, where traditional methods of cooking and baking have regained popularity in the last two decades.²² The return of lard to an everyday diet in the 1990s was only temporary, however; as soon as the economic situation improved, most people stopped consuming it. Even though a sense of nostalgia was present in people's recollections of “the days of bread and dripping”, this had no impact on more permanent changes in one's every-

²¹ Croatian author Pavao Pavličić humorously writes in his book *Kruh i mast* of his father, who said that in his lifetime he had eaten so much bread and dripping that the slices would reach the sky if placed one on top of another. Later on, Pavličić writes, they switched to margarine, then butter, until they stopped using any form of spread and nibbled on bread alongside salami and cheese. In the end, they stopped eating bread because allegedly it was fattening, even though Pavličić and his father were “thin as pike” when they ate bread and dripping. Similar accounts were reiterated by many during my research, questioning, with a dose of nostalgia, whether health professionals were right after all in their claims about unhealthy lard vs. healthier cooking oils and margarine. See Pavličić, Pavao. 1996. *Kruh i mast*. Zagreb: Znanje.

²² See, for example, articles about the rise in home baking throughout Western European countries such as Germany and the UK. See Weitzenbürger, Gudrun. 2013. [Neue Produkte lieber selber machen](#). See also Roux, Michel. 2011. [Great British Revival: The lost art of bread-making](#). (accessed: 02. August 2014).

day diet. The revived consumption of bread and dripping, a childhood staple, in the 1990s was not a matter of choice, but a necessity; as such, this food served as a sensory trigger for memories of other, more difficult times. “Memory”, according to Seremetakis²³, “[...] is a culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects.” In other words, the revival of bread and dripping in 1990s Serbia not only brought back memories from the Second World War, but people actually re-lived these memories through another period of hardship. This actual physical re-embodiment of one’s memories of life under duress sated nostalgic memories of one’s childhood, but moreover, it triggered a stream of memories of war, hardship and poverty. This explains why “nostalgia for hardship” did not have a more profound effect on people’s everyday diets - bread and dripping reappeared in their lives not because of nostalgia or a diet fad that suddenly reintroduced lard, but because there was literally nothing else to eat. As soon as the economic situation improved, people stopped consuming lard, storing it away - physically and mentally - for potential use in future difficult times.

3. Back to the future: return of the war cookbooks²⁴

In the previous section, I have pointed out the importance of foodstuffs from previous periods of hardship, such as the Second World War and the years immediately afterward. The forced “re-traditionalisation” in cooking and baking in Serbia in the 1990s relied heavily on intergenerational transmission of knowledge. As Ljiljana,²⁵ a university professor and one of my research participants remarked:

“Each generation here has ratni kuvar [a war cookbook] to which women resort in times of crisis. In difficult times, women start to recall their mothers, aunts and grandmothers, what they cooked and baked during the war; for example, how to make jam without sugar, bread without yeast, apple vinegar, etc. I called these “pauper recipes” rather than “war recipes”. It wasn’t tragic, we didn’t starve during the embargo; it was often funny and amusing [how we got by].”

Ljiljana’s example highlighted two important issues: transmission of knowledge and a derisive attitude to hyperinflation. The first was instrumental in coping with food scarcity because in the absence of any guidance from health (or any other) authorities, people relied on knowledge passed down through previous generation(s). The concept of “knowledge”, in Frederik Barth’s view, “situates its items in a particular and unequivocal way relative to events, ac-

²³ Seremetakis, Nadia. 1994. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture of Modernity*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 9.

²⁴ It must be noted that the “war cookbook” that people referred to existed only in the form of personal transmission of knowledge. Unlike the state-organised food propaganda disseminated via leaflets, booklets and radio broadcasts during times of rationing in the UK (1939-1955) which taught women how to create meals with few available ingredients, this knowledge in Serbia was transmitted personally. However, these two examples - Serbia and the UK - were similar in that women bore the brunt of food provisioning on their shoulders. In both cases, it was women who queued up relentlessly for food, who created meals in difficult conditions and shielded men and children from the full impact of the reduction in consumption. See Zweininger-Bargielowska, Ina. 2002. *Austerity in Britain: Rationing Controls and Consumption, 1939-1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 99.

²⁵ Names of research participants in this article have been changed to protect their identities.

tions and social relationships.”²⁶ (Barth, 2002:1). In other words, this knowledge about methods of surviving food shortages and scarcity - for example, in the form of recipes in personal “war cookbooks” - is reproduced within a particular group or social network. Ljiljana explained that a friend and colleague, who shared thrifty recipes with her during the economic crisis in the 1990s, had come across them in a war cookbook she had inherited from her mother-in-law, who in turn had compiled them during the Second World War. Ljiljana’s friend’s mother-in-law hailed from an established and well-off Belgrade family. Knowledge, as this case shows, is transmitted from one generation to the next, but furthermore, because it is embedded in social relationships, it reproduces values inherent to a particular class.

The other important aspect of Ljiljana’s example was an ironic attitude to hardship in the 1990s. People recounted hilarious situations from the hyperinflation period, such as waking up and stepping on a sack of flour that had been placed right next to one’s bed. No one complained of hunger, but all reiterated that flour saved everyone.²⁷ However, to be able to feed a family mainly on flour, one had to become a dedicated baker with abundant creativity and adapt quickly to continuously changing circumstances in the food market (such as finding alternative leavening agents, for example). Lola showed me her (hand-written) cookbook from the early 1990s, which included a recipe called “*Kolač od ništa*” (“Cake out of Nothing”) that she had acquired from her brother-in-law. The recipe, of course, required several ingredients, and it certainly was not made of “nothing” as its name suggested. The underlying irony of this cake’s name, and the names of many other recipes from this period, points to a derisive attitude to the situation. “Embargo Cake”, “UNPROFOR Cake”, “Crazy Dough” (or “Wonder Dough”), “Cake without Eggs”, “Rolls without Eggs”, “*Madjarica*” (“The War Cake”) and “Embargo Schnitzel” were some of the old-turned-new-again recipes which became part of one’s everyday diet during the embargo. These recipes contained two common elements: a few basic ingredients combined with improvisation and creativity. For example, fruit could be substituted with jam or vice versa, depending on what was available. Milk, eggs and dried fruit were difficult to get hold of and as such could be omitted (or included, if available) from most cake recipes. Also, as women turned to baking bread at home, they often struggled to source yeast because it was in such high demand. As a result, they came up with a recipe for “Crazy/Wonder Dough”, which could be used in a variety of sweet and savoury bread recipes over and over again. Once the first batch of “Wonder Dough” was made, a small part of it was set aside and kept in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to seven days. This dough was then used as a rising agent instead of yeast for the next round of baking.

²⁶ Barth, Fredrik. 2002. An Anthropology of Knowledge. *Current Anthropology* 43(1), 1.

²⁷ The people who took part in this research were mainly in their 40s and 50s during the early-to-mid-1990s; as such, the majority of them were employed and were able to cope much more easily than the elderly or the sick, for example, whose survival was seriously endangered by the combination of hyperinflation and the UN embargo. A tragic case in point happened in November 1993, when 70 patients died over the course of 10 days in the Gornja Toponica psychiatric hospital, near Niš in the south of Serbia, due to lack of medicine, food and heating. See Todorović, Tomislav. 1993. *Dnevno umire desetak bolesnika*. *Politika*, 17. November 1993, 1.

The names of the new foodstuffs signalled that these were not ordinary recipes. Their names were chosen, however unconsciously, in an attempt to distinguish such recipes from one’s “normal” diet as a collective reminder that the use of these recipes, just like the overall societal situation, was only temporary and not part of one’s usual everyday life. There was an underlying irony in the way these people described the foods they made with fewer ingredients as being “from nothing”. This ironic, self-deprecating attitude toward changes in food consumption brought on by austerity functioned as a buffer for coping with extreme and rapid changes in society.

Irony has found its place in many societies as a means of making sense of contradictions or extreme situations. However, many varieties of irony can encode different attitudes toward social experience, or as Alan Wilde (1981) puts it, different “horizons of assent”.²⁸ While Michael Herzfeld (2001) argues that use of irony among Greeks actually perpetuates, rather than eradicates, a sense of victimisation, James Clifford maintains that irony can motivate a search for stability and that “as long as one’s irony remains humble, a recuperation of humanism is possible.”²⁹ Clifford’s understanding of the use of irony as a “search for stability” is instrumental in analysing the irony in discourse about food in Serbia during the 1990s. It is not surprising, then, to learn that hardly any of the recipes from the 1990s are still used today; in most cases, it took my research participants a long time to locate these recipes in their cookbooks, showing that they had long since been abandoned. The war recipes and cookbooks from 20 years ago have been replaced with “regular” recipes containing abundant and diverse ingredients. Even though many of my informants complained of the continuous difficult economic situation in Serbia, and some of them confessed that they were forced to bake bread at home because it was cheaper, no one used the war recipes any longer. If they did sometimes bake a cake with similar ingredients as the eponymous “Embargo Cake”, they gave it a different name (“Easy Fruitcake” or “Cake with Apples”), thereby affirming that, despite ongoing economic difficulties, life had returned to “normal” compared to the situation 20 years earlier.

4. **Grow your own**³⁰

In addition to home baking, women also resorted to using whatever vegetables and fruits they could get hold of from food markets. At that time, fruit and vegetables were commonly sold in *zelena pijaca*, food markets where farmers from nearby villages displayed their produce. During hyperinflation, producers tied the prices of their food to the German mark and adjusted prices accordingly during the day. The problem with this was that people’s salaries were not adjusted in line with hyperinflation. As a result, by the time one got to the market, he or she could afford to buy only a couple of eggs or a kilo of potatoes with

²⁸ Fernandez, James W. 2001. Introduction, in Fernandez, James W. and Mary Taylor Huber (eds). *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 3.

²⁹ Fernandez, *Irony in Action*, 30.

³⁰ Although this title may be reminiscent of the British “Dig For Victory” campaign during the Second World War, the efforts for growing one’s own food in 1990s Serbia had nothing to do with any state-sponsored propaganda. These were solely individual efforts in which people used all available resources to bring food to the table.

an entire monthly wage. Even though fruit and vegetables *were* available to buy at green markets, most people could not afford the cost unless they had foreign currency savings to spend on food.

For this reason, people frequently used any piece of land they had to grow their own vegetables. Ljiljana, the university professor from Belgrade quoted in the previous section, had a sister who lived in a house in Belgrade. During the hyperinflation period, Ljiljana's sister dug out the flowers from a small front garden outside her house and planted vegetables there instead. The majority of people in Belgrade lived in blocks of flats, not houses. However, many city dwellers were among the first generation of their families to leave the countryside and maintained strong ties to their villages, returning every weekend to take part in farming alongside their relatives in the countryside.³¹ Others had plots (*plac*) near Belgrade where they grew fruit and vegetables. The main obstacle in both cases was access to villages and plots, as petrol was only available on the black market at a highly inflated price of five German marks per litre (the equivalent of 2.5 euros per litre). Those who could not afford the petrol to commute to their village or *plac* every weekend relied on bus services which were heavily reduced and overcrowded. One of my research participants, Stana, shared an anecdote from one of these trips to the *plac* that she owned and tended alongside her late husband:

"It was summer 1993 and my husband and I wanted to go to our plac to harvest garden peas; however, because there was not enough petrol and the bus service to our village was suspended, we had to take an alternative route which involved an hour's walk from the bus stop to our plac. It was a very hot and sticky day and I was wearing a summer dress and sandals. The bus that we were on was so crowded that by time I got out of the bus, the elastic band on my knickers snapped and they fell off as I got off the bus! And then we had another hour on foot to get to our plac. By the time we got there, my sandals were completely torn and destroyed."

Stana lived with her husband, son, daughter and granddaughter in a one-bedroom flat in New Belgrade. She worked as a seamstress for the army, and her salary was so low that she could not even afford to buy a bag of potatoes during hyperinflation. Growing her own vegetables at any cost - including episodes like this, torn sandals, lost underwear and all - was the only available solution she saw to feed her family. Because she had grown up in a village in the mountains, Stana had extensive knowledge about foraging, growing and preparing food. She had seven brothers, and as the only daughter she was expected to cook, clean and tend livestock from a very early age; thus, Stana learnt to make bread and pies before the age of six, and her mother taught her about the wild foods they collected from the forest. Stana was familiar with

³¹ In 1989, Belgrade had more than 1.6 million inhabitants, but only one-third of its population had been born there. Compare Kaser, Karl. 1995. *Familie und Verwandtschaft auf dem Balkan. Analyse einer untergehenden Kultur*. Vienna-Cologne-Weimar: Böhlau, 427. As well as Kaser, Karl. 2008. *Patriarchy after Patriarchy: Gender Relations in Turkey and the Balkans, 1500-2000*. Vienna/Berlin: Lit Verlag, 121. This suggests that family relationships between those living in the city and those in the countryside were quite strong, particularly during the sanctions in the early 1990s when townspeople relied much more on help with food from their relatives in the countryside. Compare Matić, Miloš. 2005. Urban economies in a rural manner: family economizing in socialist Serbian center, *Ethnologia Balkanica* 9, 144.

wild mushrooms and knew which ones were safe to eat; she also collected nettle and used it to make soups. Rosehips, blackberries, hawthorne berries and cherry plums were just some of the wild foods which Stana picked from a forest near her *plac* and used to make jams and squashes.

Stana was not an exception in this manner; several of my research participants took pride in possessing knowledge about wild foods, as well as in their ability to use it to feed their families in ways they considered healthier than merely cooking with flour three times a day. Another female informant, Gordana, worked as a commercial director in one of the major high-street banks in Serbia at the time. From Monday to Friday, Gordana was dedicated to her high-flying career, while during weekends she worked on the land in the village where she was from. Gordana’s mother and sister lived permanently in their family house in a village in southwestern Serbia; her family was well-off and owned around 10 hectares of land in and around the village. Even though Gordana did not live with them, the family members continued to pool their resources and worked the land together. Gordana went to Bulgaria and Romania to buy seed and salt for her family and neighbours in the village, since these items were difficult to obtain during the hyperinflation period. Because her family had no agricultural machinery and just owned the land, they had a “50-50” agreement with their village neighbours. In practice, this meant that their neighbours did all the machinery-related work and in return received half of all the crops from Gordana’s family’s land. Gordana and her family reciprocated by taking part in their neighbours’ seasonal work.

In addition to cultivating wheat, corn, vegetables and fruit, Gordana foraged the woods for wild herbs and foods because of their presumably higher quality compared to home-grown foods. Instead of using spinach in cooking, Gordana preferred nettle due to its higher nutritional value than cultivated leafy green vegetables:

“I regularly made soups from nettle or wild mushrooms, both of which I collected in the forest near my village. Wherever other women put spinach, I used nettle: in filo pastry pies, savoury muffins... I even used it instead of parsley to sprinkle over vegetable broths. This relationship with the land, both cultivated and wild - that was our lifeline during hyperinflation, this is what saved people from starvation.”

Once again, the transmission of knowledge of farming and foraging gained from preindustrial life was what helped women grow their own food and source wild foods safe for consumption. Because of the rapid industrialisation that took place in former Yugoslavia after the Second World War, many facets of pre-industrial life were well preserved, and practices from the pre-industrial period coexisted simultaneously with industrialised Yugoslav society (1945-1991). One’s know-how in farming and foraging, extended family connections with those who still farmed, a return to lard (over industrial oils), re-learning how to bake - all pointed to a pre-industrial lifestyle. People survived the UN sanctions and hyperinflation as this not-too-distant knowledge and skillset was reinvigorated and reintroduced. This knowledge was transmitted *intergenerationally* through those who experienced war, poverty and scarcity as well as *intragenerationally* through the experience of a simultaneous coexistence of

industrial and pre-industrial worlds in postwar Serbia. Despite Tito's efforts to reform the pre-industrial way of life in Yugoslavia after 1945, it continued to coexist alongside industrialised consumer society, often creating paradoxes of modern life in former Yugoslavia.³² This explains the irony and self-deprecating attitude of citizens during the UN embargo: people made fun of their surreal everyday lives because they possessed survival skills and knowledge that helped them to circumvent the crisis. Instead of becoming helpless victims of halted consumerism, they turned to re-creating ways of producing and sourcing food for their needs. Irony and self-mockery served as a reminder that this was yet another paradox associated with inhabiting a simultaneously modern and pre-modern society; additionally, it served to separate this "carnavalesque" period (in Bakhtin's terms) from "normal" or "regular" life.

However, not everyone in Belgrade had relatives in the countryside or plots to grow their own food - or even the knowledge of how to grow things. These people relied heavily on their social networks, which consisted of relatives, friends, work colleagues and neighbours. These networks were a considerable source of the capital that enabled survival during the worst period of hyperinflation in the early 1990s. In the next section, we will analyse these social networks and the way people used them for everyday survival.

5. Social networks

Milena worked as a clinical doctor in the early 1990s. She lived in a one-bedroom flat in New Belgrade with her husband Voja, also a doctor, and their two children: one in secondary school at the time, and the other a medical student. Milena recalled the shock she experienced when the embargo turned the familiar into the unrecognizable seemingly overnight:

Before the sanctions there was everything. I remember walking past the shop window in Knez Mihajlova³³ and looking at Mozartkugel chocolate balls; they were expensive and I could not afford them, but it was a feast to see them. This abundance of food followed by such scarcity was shocking. It was so confusing to see empty shelves everywhere. For my whole monthly salary, that of a specialist clinical doctor, all I could buy was three eggs. We had no relatives in the countryside to help us with food, and our doctors' union never really functioned, so there was no help with food from there either. But there was solidarity among people. One friend who worked for the government brought us rice once; also, I had a cousin who was a refugee from Croatia who settled in a village close to the river Danube north of Belgrade, and he once brought us a basket filled with beans and homemade jams that he and his wife made. I will never forget the sight of my cousin carrying this old-fashioned washing basket filled with foods we could only dream of then.

As this example demonstrates, the changes were rapid, and "subsistence networks,"³⁴ consisting of family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues, became

³² For a description of rural-urban paradox in Serbia, see Matić, *Urban economies*.

³³ Knez Mihajlova is a pedestrian street in the heart of Belgrade city centre.

³⁴ Perianu, Catherina. 2008. *Précarité Alimentaire, Austerité* [Food insecurity and austerity: Eating in the last decade of communism in Romania] in *Anthropology of Food* 6. (accessed: 02. August 2014).

vital in getting hold of food. The more people one knew and/or was connected to, the more likely one was to obtain food or information about where and when food could be found. Describing the coping strategies during several crisis periods in Argentina over the last 20 years, Aguirre noted that social networks acted as a “social security system” whereby people not only exchanged food or information about food, but also provided care and protection by doing so, thereby reinforcing existing social links.³⁵ In the case of Serbia in the 1990s, social networks played a very similar role: they provided people with food, but furthermore offered a broad range of services as a replacement for failed institutional support.

This exchange of services and food between friends and relatives in post-1990s Belgrade bears many similarities to Moscow during the same period,³⁶ Romania during the last decade of Communism³⁷ and Argentina during several crisis periods in the 1990s and early 2000s.³⁸ Describing the phenomenon of exchange in Russia, Caldwell argued that it could not be classified as a traditional exchange in which a relationship between the parties involved exists only during the exchange,³⁹ nor does it conform to the classical gift exchange pattern⁴⁰ wherein a receiver is expected to reciprocate within a particular time frame. Exchanges in this traditional context exist prior to sociality, and people actually use exchanges to sustain relationships.⁴¹ Instances of exchange in post-communist Serbia, Russia and Argentina, however, presuppose the existence of a relationship prior to any exchange. Caldwell argues that in post-communist Russia, “acts of exchange verify and concretize existing social relations and the trust that exists between partners.”⁴² Likewise, in the case of Argentina, Aguirre noted that “[reciprocity] reinforce[d] and/or maintain[ed] existing social links between friends, neighbours, and/or family members.”⁴³ As we have seen, exchange in post-1990 Serbia took place within a social network that consisted of family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Moreover, as much as kinship relationships were revived and mobilised in the post-communist period as a substitute for the collapse of institutions and institutional support, other elements of social networks, such as relationships with friends, colleagues and neighbours, became a complementary source of capital. The vacuum created in between the collapse of communism and the slow and reluctant emergence of new post-communist state institutions was filled as people in Serbia, Russia and Argentina reinforced their personal networks of family and friends.

³⁵ Aguirre, Patricia. 2005. *Estrategias de Consume: qué Comen los Argentinos que Comen* [Strategies of Consumption: What Argentinians Eat]. Buenos Aires: Centro Interdisciplinario para el Estudio de Políticas Públicas, 125.

³⁶ Humphrey, Caroline. 1995. Creating a culture of disillusionment: consumption in Moscow 1993, a chronicle of changing times, in *Worlds Apart*, edited by Miller, Daniel. London: Routledge, 43-68; Caldwell, Melissa. 2004. *Not by Bread Alone: Social Support in the New Russia*. Berkeley/LA: University of California Press.

³⁷ Perianu, *Précarité Alimentaire*.

³⁸ Aguirre, *Estrategias de Consume*.

³⁹ Sahlins, 1972, cited in Caldwell, *Not By Bread Alone*, 98.

⁴⁰ Mauss, Marcel. 2002. *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. London & New York: Routledge.

⁴¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mauss 1990, cited in Caldwell, *Not By Bread Alone*, 98.

⁴² Caldwell, *Not By Bread Alone*, 98.

⁴³ Aguirre, *Estrategias de Consume*, 125.

The wider and stronger one's social network is, the more capital one possesses. It may not be possible or necessary to bank on that capital immediately, but by keeping a relationship active, one holds on to a bond whose value will not change with time. Carolyn Stevens aptly termed these personal connections as "deposits in [the] favour bank."⁴⁴ This is illustrated well by the example of Ljiljana, the university professor, who noted that people helped one another during hyperinflation in a way that has not occurred since:

"There was a lot of solidarity at work; we exchanged our salaries from dinars to [German] marks, going to street currency dealers together to get a better rate, and if there wasn't enough small change to divide the salaries, we didn't mind paying more to someone because next time someone else would be in that situation. Today, many of those colleagues can't see eye to eye with one another, but a memory of that solidarity is still there."

This "social security system", however, was not predicated on direct reciprocity: Milena had no obligation to return gifts to her friends or relatives, nor was Ljiljana obligated to return even a single German mark to the colleague with whom she had split her converted salary, within any particular time frame. This (relative) freedom of debt was what Milena, and many other research participants, termed *solidarnost* ("solidarity"). People helped others in their social network without expecting a direct return of the favour, but this did not cancel their debt. This "debt" remained as a necessary component of the social network, and as such it could be considered a "social network tax". *Solidarnost* was the only way to morally release oneself from this "debt". In other words, to be solidary was to keep up with regular payments of "social network tax".

Milena, Ljiljana and many other research participants emphasised the difference between people today compared to the period of economic hardship in the 1990s, noting that solidarity among people no longer existed. This could be construed as a nostalgic, rose-tinted view of the past, but it could also be argued that instances of solidarity experienced in the 1990s were typical of the extraordinary socio-economic situation in Serbia. As the economic crisis eased, pressure on social networks as "subsistence networks"⁴⁵ gradually lessened; in turn, the favours and debts incurred by those favours became smaller. This effectively led to a decrease in solidarity because "social network tax" was much lower. What changed, in other words, was not people and their morality or humanity, but the size and effectiveness of social networks that operated with reduced capacity.

6. Smuggling

So far, I have identified several survival strategies during the period of hyperinflation in Serbia: the strengthening of social networks, knowledge and dissemination of old recipes and methods for preparing food, and access to land and farming. Two additional and inseparable strategies for coping with food scarcity were *švercovanje* (smuggling) and the black market. The latter strategy belonged to the realm of illegal market operations; as such, it was usually in

⁴⁴ Stevens, 1997: 231, cited in Caldwell, *Not By Bread Alone*, 98.

⁴⁵ Perianu, *Précarité Alimentaire*.

the hands of local gangsters, popularly called “the mafia” even though it was not related to the Italian counterpart whose name it bore.

Everyone took part in smuggling because the embargo put a stop to official trade, yet people still needed petrol, food, clothes, shoes, toiletries and other everyday necessities. Even those who stayed away from the smuggling business became customers whose needs encouraged smuggling. Smuggling was so widespread that the implicit notion of illegality inherent in the concept was almost completely lost. Whilst some people condemned the practice, they nevertheless relied on smugglers for their everyday survival.

Unlike food, which people got hold of by queuing endlessly, travelling across town to a remote grocery store, baking continuously or growing their own if they had no relatives in the countryside to supply them, items such as petrol and cigarettes could only be procured from smugglers.⁴⁶ During the embargo, petrol was normally sold on streets from canisters. People would buy anything between two and 10 litres of petrol, depending on how much they could afford due to heavily inflated prices of approximately five German marks per litre (approximately 2.5 euros or 2 GBP today). Cigarettes were another product that disappeared from regular shopping venues and moved almost exclusively to the black market. Occasionally there would be long queues outside newsagent kiosks, a sign that cigarettes were in stock. More often, however, as was the case with many other products during hyperinflation, one had to rely on the black market for a regular supply of cigarettes. In a similar way to petrol, cigarettes were smuggled on both a large and small scale - while some sold cigarettes for the “big players”, others smuggled for personal consumption.

Boban lived on the outskirts of Belgrade with his wife and four children. They were of Romani origin and as such, by his own admission, faced more challenges in everyday life compared to other non-Romani citizens in Serbia. During the crisis their situation became an even greater predicament, leading Boban, alongside many other Romanis, into criminal activities for survival:

“Before the sanctions, I worked in a factory that produced agricultural machinery. When the sanctions kicked in, production stopped and I was out of work. Everyone was out of work, and being a Rom, I had zero chances of getting a job. We lived in Surčin⁴⁷ - that was a mafia stronghold, and faced with zero opportunities for finding work while having a wife and four kids to feed, I went to them to ask for help. The local mafia boss said that he was happy to give me money as a one-off, but he said that wouldn’t last for long and he knew I’d be back asking for more money. Instead he offered me a job, asking me to choose between selling petrol, cigarettes or toilet paper. I chose cigarettes. If I worked well, the boss said, they would reward me, and if, on the other hand, I tried to trick them, I’d get a bullet in my head. They paid regularly, and if anyone bothered me - like one time, when police raided my home and took me to the police station - it was enough to say whom I

⁴⁶ As a consequence of the UN embargo, the official import of petrol was banned and petrol stations were left empty. This ban paved the way for illegal methods of smuggling petrol into the country. On a large scale, petrol was shipped illegally from neighbouring countries along rivers and roads. Additionally, individual smugglers carried petrol in passenger cars; some had converted passenger cars for petrol smuggling by adding an additional petrol tank, which often led to disasters.

⁴⁷ Surčin is located on the outskirts of Belgrade near the airport.

worked for and they let me go. I had four young children, and my wife could not find work any more as a house cleaner because even the well-to-do town women could not afford cleaners at that time. The six of us lived all in one room, without running water or a bathroom, and with single-phase electricity power, which we diverted from my father's house. I had no other choice, really, but to join the smuggling business."

Boban's case was typical of two categories among those in Serbia at the time: the recently unemployed - that is, people who lost work because industrial production came to a halt with the introduction of the embargo⁴⁸ - and the Romani population, many of whom took to smuggling in the early 1990s as the only available option to securing livelihood. Boban stopped selling cigarettes several years later and instead started to fix cars for a living. As the overall economic situation improved, Boban's wife Marta found work as a cleaner again, often taking her children to help her during weekends and school holidays. All four of their children finished secondary education; Boban and Marta proudly added that two of their children live abroad now and are earning a "decent living" from their work at checkout tills in a supermarket, enough to secure independent livelihood. Marta was a bit disappointed with her eldest daughter, who trained to be a tram driver but could not find work in that profession because of discrimination against Romanis and instead now works as a cleaner in a hospital. Their son is seriously ill and unable to work, and Boban and Marta look after him and his family. Even though smuggling provided a lifeline during the worst times of economic hardship in the 1990s, Boban and Marta insisted that their children had to finish school and earn qualifications that would lead to employment and better opportunities in life.

From businessmen and criminals collaborating with those in power to individuals travelling across the border in search of food supplies for resale or their own consumption, smuggling became an integral part of everyone's life during the period of hyperinflation and UN sanctions. For example, my informant Stojanka worked as a post office clerk and regularly travelled to Budapest for food and clothes during the sanctions. She went along on organised coach tours from Belgrade to Budapest flea market, where she bought cheap clothes in bulk to resell. Stojanka worked mainly with women, and whatever clothes she had available to purchase would sell quickly. The money she earned from these sales covered the cost of her trips and the food she would buy for her family. This was a common practice among many with foreign currency, entrepreneurial skills and the flexibility to embrace such survival strategies. As was the case with Boban, Stojanka also abandoned smuggling as soon as the economic crisis became less acute. 20 years on, Stojanka is retired and spends most of her time looking after her grandchildren. In her spare time, she travels with ex-colleagues from work. Shopping visits to the Chinese market in Budapest in the 1990s have nowadays been replaced with visits to European landmark tourist destinations. The days of *šverc ture* ("smuggling tours") to Budapest

⁴⁸ The previously mentioned study of the dual economy and black market in Serbia in the early 1990s concluded that all social "layers" took part in the second economy, especially the unemployed, qualified and unqualified workers, blue-collar workers and less-skilled white-collar workers. See Mrkšić, Danilo. 1994. Dualizacija ekonomije i stratifikacija struktura: siva ekonomija kao način preživljavanja, in *Razaranje društva: Jugoslovensko društvo u krizi devedestih*, edited by Lazić, Mladen, et al. Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 67.

seemed like the distant past as she talked about her recent coach trip to Italy, Spain and the south of France organised by her pensioners’ society.

Boban’s current situation is quite different from that of Stojanka, who kept her job during the crisis and is now retired with a regular monthly income. Unlike her, Boban has no security in the form of a pension - he worked for 32 years before he was made redundant, he is 60 years old and, in his own words, he is now “unemployable because he is too old”. Despite such circumstances, things have changed for the better over the last two decades for Boban as well. In 1997 he started to build a small house, noting, “When others had nothing, our situation was not too bad; thanks to the cigarette-smuggling business, we moved on from six of us sleeping in one room to building our own little house.” The house is still pretty much a “work in progress”, in Boban’s words - only one room has windows, while the others are still boarded up - but it is nevertheless a much better situation compared to two decades ago. Thanks to the success of his cigarette-smuggling business, Boban could afford to educate all of his four children. Having said that, there is a certain bitterness evident when he talks about the discrimination his eldest daughter has experienced as a Romani, unable to get a job as a tram driver in the public transport company even though she trained to do so: “What’s the point of educating my children if they are only seen as Gypsies and not as people with degrees?” He may be a bitter father because of the injustice that his children are subjected to, but Boban is certainly not a passive victim of the system: he joined one of the opposition parties early on in the 1990s, and he still attends meetings of their local branch. Party leaders have changed during the last 20 years, and he is now, in his own words, “like a granddad compared to the young leaders”, but he insists on going to the meetings because he believes the only way to make things better for the Romanis in Serbia is for them to become visible and included in political life.

The cases of Boban and Stojanka provide a useful lens to observe and analyse smuggling and the black market as coping strategies during the economic crisis of the 1990s. Both examples illustrate positive and negative aspects of the black market. Smuggling was not only a source of complementary income for many, including Stojanka, but it was a lifeline; for some, like Boban and his family, it was a way to a better life. Sociologist Danilo Mrkšić argued that “grey economy” helped the poor in particular, enabling them to survive and reducing social tension and clashes.⁴⁹ Other views on “grey economy” in Serbia have been much less nuanced and focus on its negative aspects only. For example, an argument that increased activity on the black market will lead to a deeper criminalisation of society and greater social tensions⁵⁰ was often repeated in public and academic discourse.⁵¹ The two examples above demonstrated that the black market opened opportunities for those who had nowhere else to turn for help and that despite being so widespread and socially sanitised, smuggling did not become part of one’s embodied knowledge, or *habitus*, even among those

⁴⁹ Mrkšić, *Dualizacija ekonomije i stratifikacija struktura*, 68.

⁵⁰ Božović, Gorana. 1996. Siva ekonomija u uslovima tranzicije privrede Srbije. *Ekonomika misao* 29(1), 89-105.

⁵¹ Vujović, Sreten. 1994. Promene u materijalnom standardu i načinu života društvenih slojeva, in *Razaranje društva: Jugoslovensko društvo u krizi devedestih*, edited by Lazić, Mladen, et al. Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 82.

who took part in it.⁵² As much as Boban made a living from smuggling, he used it as a means to an end - that is, for securing accommodation and educating his children. Despite a seemingly obvious assumption that smuggling stimulated the criminalisation of society,⁵³ I would suggest that the black market alone probably caused much less long-term damage than the strengthening of social networks and obligations that these networks created. While the activity of the black market and smuggling could be curtailed with adequate institutional support, debts and obligations created in social networks were more difficult to cancel because they had no expiry date.

Conclusion

Creativity flourished during the period of severe economic crisis and the UN embargo in 1990s Serbia. From feeding a family almost literally on nothing or very few ingredients, to substituting familiar foodstuffs with those that belonged to earlier times, and from replacing market foods to creating one's own - all of these examples testify to the incredible resilience and creative forces that came into action as a response to hyperinflation and embargo. Instead of living as passive victims, people became active agents in securing livelihood in the precarious socioeconomic conditions of the early 1990s. Coping strategies for overcoming austerity during hyperinflation and embargo included transmission of knowledge about "older" methods of sourcing and preparing food, social networks and solidarity, resorting to the black market and smuggling; either as consumers or providers. While transmission of knowledge secured not only one's survival, but also social reproduction, the consequences of other coping strategies were more mixed. Strengthening social networks was pivotal in circumventing the economic crisis, but its consequences are long-term and still plague Serbian society. As much as these networks now operate with a diminished capacity because the end of the acute crisis reduced one's need to rely on them, debts that were created between their actors remain. Debts incurred in social networks are not typical forms of exchange, where a debt needs to be repaid within a particular time frame. Social-network debts have no time frame within which they have to be settled; a debtor can be called upon at any point. Unlike the black market, which was contained with institutional support, social networks are out of remit of institutional control, although they operate as part of those very institutions. Precisely for this reason, they are so effective in times of need and yet so dangerous when the acute crisis had passed.

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⁵² Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*.

⁵³ Božović, *Siva ekonomija*.

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