

The Region after Yugoslavia

by Jacqueline Nießer

Abstract

What does it mean to talk about the former Yugoslavia as region? The concept of region here neither means a world region nor a historical mesoregion (Geschichtsregion), and it does not describe subnational nor supranational formats easily. We are concerned with a process of re-spatialization after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. I am discussing this process based on my ethnography of the Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia (RECOM). RECOM, as a network of civil society activists striving for the official institutionalization of a regional truth commission, can be considered a non-governmental agent of region-making. But this region means less a space.

There is a strange use of the word *region* in the countries of the former Yugoslavia as an interview with the author Predrag Lucić illustrates: Lucić: Actually, how do you call the territory of the former Yugoslavia today?

Journalist: Region, of course.

Lucić: Mhm, in Yugoslavia it was clear what a region is: Istria, Kvarner, Sanjak, and Dalmatia [...] Today, we are not all together a state anymore; we are *the region* [emphasis added]!¹

What seems to be so self-evident for the people in the countries on the territory of the former Yugoslavia might cause uneasiness within area studies. The reason is that *region* here neither means a world region nor a historical mesoregion (Geschichtsregion), and it does not describe subnational nor supranational formats easily.² What kind of

¹Predrag Lucić, Jugoslavija je bila naša EU - sanjali su je najbolji, a srušili najgori. URL: <http://www.6yka.com/novost/117800/predrag-lucic-jugoslavija-je-bila-nasa-eu-sanjali-su-je-najbolji-a-srusili-najgori> (07.09.2017). Translation from BCS by J.Nießer.

²Holm Sundhassen, Die Wiederentdeckung des Raums: Über Nutzen und Nachteile von Geschichtsregionen. In: Konrad Clewing/ Oliver Jens Schmitt/ Edgar Hösch (eds.),

category signifies *region* then?

I am discussing this question based on my ethnography of the Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia (RECOM).³ RECOM is not a regional *commission* for investigating what happened during the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration, instead RECOM is a regional *network* promoting an official truth commission to be established through a common effort by the states on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The network consists of about 2,000 members – individuals and non-governmental organizations – from the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Between 2006 and 2011, RECOM has facilitated about 150 consultations on memory politics, in which around 6,000 people participated.⁴ The idea was to reconcile the documentation of war victims so that individual victim numbers were no longer compared to one another but added together as a common heritage of the former Yugoslavia. RECOM, as a network of civil society activists striving for the official institutionalization of a regional truth commission, can be considered a non-governmental agent of region-making.⁵

Negotiating Scope

My study of the cooperation in RECOM illustrates that the term *region* refers to what remains of the former Yugoslavia. But this is less a question of territory or geographical space. My research revealed that RECOM initially did not even consider the entire post-Yugoslav space for their activities because, at the beginning of the consultations in 2006, RECOM was still using the broader term „Western Balkans“,

Südosteuropa. Von vormoderner Vielfalt und nationalstaatlicher Vereinheitlichung. Festschrift für Edgar Hösch. München 2005, pp. 13–33; Stefan Troebst, Historical Meso-Regions and Transregionalism. In: Matthias Middell (ed.): The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies. London, New York, NY 2019, pp. 169–178.

³<https://www.recom.link/en/sta-je-RECOM/> (07.04.21).

⁴Jacqueline Nießer, Die Wahrheit der Anderen. Transnationale Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung in Postjugoslawien am Beispiel der REKOM Initiative. Göttingen 2020.

⁵Fredrik Söderbaum, Rethinking Regionalism. London, New York, NY 2016, pp. 132–146.

which was coined by the European Union for the countries with accession prospects and which is not limited to the former Yugoslavia. At the major meeting in Croatia in 2007, the organizer and main Croatian partner of RECOM, the non-governmental organization Documenta – Center for Dealing with the Past, took the precaution of not assigning a spatial classification to the project as the Croatian public was too sensitive to terms that evoked Yugoslav references. Instead, one panel used the subnational reading of the word *regional* – namely, referring to different regions within Croatia. Since 2008, linguistic continuity occurred: RECOM henceforth used the spatial category „former Yugoslavia“ (*bivša/nekadašnja Jugoslavija*) or „region“ (*regija*).

The scope of activities at RECOM expanded continuously with each subsequent year. The initiative started in 2006 with meetings in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia; in 2007, events were added in Croatia. In 2008, meetings were also held in Kosovo and Montenegro; and finally, since 2010, the consultations have also covered Slovenia and North Macedonia. It thus took four years until the regional civil society exchange had expanded to the entire former Yugoslav territory. This might have been for pragmatic reasons as the organization of the consultation process was already difficult in the three countries of the initial cooperation (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia). The reasons might also have been thematic as the focus on documenting war crimes put those countries bearing the greatest burden of war at the centre. In the case of North Macedonia, the originally envisaged period of investigation (1991–1999) was certainly also initially a criterion for exclusion since the conflict there did not occur until 2001.

Interestingly, after the agreement on „the territory of the former Yugoslavia“ as the reference area of action, the exchange shifted to the national level, and transnational meetings became less frequent. Coming to terms with the past has been increasingly discussed in a national context since 2008, specifically in Serbia, in the recently (at that time) declared independent Kosovo, and in Montenegro as well as in Croatia. No events were held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008

as the main Bosnian actor – the Sarajevo Research and Documentation Center – increasingly distanced itself from RECOM. One reason for the national focus since 2008 might have been that various discussants in the first meetings in 2006 and 2007 had repeatedly urged that it was important to achieve a minimum consensus within the individual countries before the past on a transnational level could be discussed at all.

Local Encounters

In 2009, RECOM pursued a new spatial format in its civil society cooperation. It went to the municipalities and small towns, and most exchanges took place at the so-called local level in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Montenegro. About 60 meetings happened in 2009, which meant a considerable organizational effort and a mobilization push.⁶ Analysing the RECOM consultation in Knin on 4 August 2009, I have illustrated in my book how symbolically such a small gathering can function, namely as an act of counter-remembrance. The consultation took place in Knin on the day before the Croatian Victory Day celebrations and had as its theme an anti-nationalist, critical examination of the acts of war in Croatia. The description and analysis of the consultations illustrate that clear victim-perpetrator attributions along ethnic categories are difficult to sustain when individual stories are looked at.

For the initiative, this move into the local brought important changes. Over the course of 2009, through the numerous discussions on the ground, it became clear how unrealistic a project of a regional truth commission run by a cooperation of the post-Yugoslav states seemed to those involved. Despite the comprehensive activities between the non-governmental organizations, political support was hard to gain.

Meetings were held again in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2009, but the self-governance ambitions of the new Bosnian partners caused a rift with the Belgrade leadership, the Humanitarian Law Center in

⁶For a map of the local consultations, see Nießer, *Die Wahrheit der Anderen*.

Belgrade. Bosnia and Herzegovina's activists' will to shape their own affairs, combined with their rejection of any paternalism or influence „from the outside“, is an important result of the local consultations. Dealing with these differences of opinion, with the dissatisfaction and tension that accompanied them, was a challenge for the rest of the cooperation process. However, to describe them as failures contradicts the intention to explore dealing with the past as a process of dialogue that comprises ultimately enduring differences. The fact that the decentralization and self-governance ambitions from Bosnia and Herzegovina were not taken up but averted had a lasting impact on the support for the RECOM initiative in that country. After a failed attempt at conciliation at the regional meeting in Novi Sad in the spring of 2010, the representatives of the five Bosnian non-governmental organizations that took over the coordination in 2009 went public, resulting in some negative headlines for RECOM.

However, RECOM has struggled not just on the local level in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The very low number of signatures in the public campaign in Croatia in 2011 and the resignation of the RECOM representative in North Macedonia in 2014 are worth mentioning too. While politicians in the other countries offered at least declarative support for RECOM, politicians in Slovenia showed no interest at all in supporting a regional initiative for coping with the wars. However, activists from Slovenia of the 'erased victims' saw RECOM as an opportunity to reconnect with human right activists from the former Yugoslavia.⁷ In Kosovo, the organizers of the RECOM consultations met with considerable resistance, but they avoided bringing it out into the open. Most actors in Kosovo at the time stressed the importance of bringing the perpetrators to justice and of searching for missing persons about a decade after the culmination of the conflict in Kosovo in 1999. The representatives of the victims' groups in Kosovo were concerned with the multilayered forms of recognition: as an independent state, as

⁷<https://www.mirovni-institut.si/izbrisani/en/about-erasure/index.html> (07.04.2021).

victims of many years of repression, and as victims of war. This demand was directed primarily at Serbia. In this respect, coming to terms with the past outside of the courts and, even more so, confronting the past in a regional context were premature undertakings in Kosovo. Nevertheless, RECOM continued to have an impact here as well by providing opportunities to articulate these concerns.

Overcoming the „Yugosphere“

At the same time of the RECOM consultations, the British journalist Tim Judah had proposed the term „Yugosphere“ to designate increasing connections in the cultural and economic spheres on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.⁸ However, the proposal was barely considered or, if it was, very critically by scholars.⁹ The sociologist and historian Irena Ristić, for example, made no reference whatsoever to the „Yugosphere“ when she described a new type of „Yugoslav“ networking „from below“, which was fed by the awareness of a common language, a common space, and a common history and which manifested itself in current economic and cultural cooperation.¹⁰ The writer Dubravka Ugrešić said that the term was very much associated with nostalgia for Tito and for a particular form of communism. And in a commentary on an interview with her, the „hegemonic identity of Yugoslav“ was declared by an Albanian („Prespari“) to have failed forever.¹¹

Thus, various reasons require us to recognize the „Yugosphere“ as something of the past: the association with nostalgia and with

⁸Tim Judah, Yugoslavia is dead: Long live the Yugosphere. In: LSSE Papers on Southeastern Europe (2009).

⁹Nick Holdstock, The Yugosphere – A Useful Concept? 31.10.2011. URL: <http://www.citsee.eu/blog/yugosphere-useful-concept> (13.06.2019).

¹⁰Irena Ristić, Rapprochement as a Paradigm Shift. Does the Wheel Come Full Circle in Former Yugoslavia? In: Südosteuropa 3 (2011), pp. 286–300.

¹¹„We Albanians never embraced this hegemonic identity of Yugoslav. It was imperialistic and the collapse of the state showed it was a fallacy. I find it amusing how apologists of this failed idea still keep brandishing the line that most in Yugoland wanted to be ‚Yugoslavs‘. If that was true, Yugoslavia would still be a reality. Instead it is history, where it belongs.“ Kommentar von „Prespari“ zum Interview mit Dubravka Ugrešić, To Be Yugoslav Now Requires a Footnote, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/to-be-yugoslav-now-requires-a-footnote> (19.03.2015).

overcoming an undemocratic social system; the marginalization of Albanians; and finally, the bloody end of Yugoslavia. Describing the present connections on the territory of the former Yugoslavia necessitates the use of alternative terms.

The anthropologist Tanja Petrović argues for the term „post-Yugoslav“ because the Yugoslav heritage continues to operate, on the one hand, but unfolds beyond the former state, on the other hand. The guiding ideas of this heritage are anti-fascism, resistance, cosmopolitanism, and solidarity. But Petrović sees a dilemma that arises when one wants to understand Yugoslavia as something of the past but as well wants to revive the common experiences from Yugoslavia: „To feed present desires and accelerate collective affects in post-Yugoslav times, Yugoslavia needs to be emptied of any past desires, visions, and affects. But is such Yugoslavia, emptied of life, capable of making an intervention in the present or in the future?“¹² The historian Dragan Markovina describes the cultural sector as a form of Yugoslav residue.¹³ The historian Ljubica Spaskovska proposes the term „Yugoslav chronotope“ to catch the „Yugoslav experience“ that „relates to the socio-cultural fabric, but more importantly to the lived experiences, perceptions and narratives within the framework of the Yugoslav project“.¹⁴ Catherine Baker speaks of „the Yugoslav region“, referring to „the territories and identities that used to be part of Yugoslavia“ and that thereby indirectly evokes a meaning beyond a bygone spatial order too.¹⁵

Common Ground

¹²Tanja Petrović, Towards an Affective History of Yugoslavia. In: *Filozofia i Društvo* XXVII/3 (2016), pp. 504–520, here p. 517.

¹³Dragan Markovina, *Jugoslavenstvo poslije svega*. Beograd 2015. I thank Nataša Jagdhuhn for this hint, which she explores more in her dissertation: „Broken Museality: Reframing World War II Heritage in the Post-Yugoslav Transition“, Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena 2020.

¹⁴Ljubica Spaskovska, *The Yugoslav Chronotope. Histories, Memories and the Future of Yugoslav Studies*. In: Florian Bieber / Armina Galijaš / Rory Archer (eds.): *Debating the End of Yugoslavia*. Farnham 2014, pp. 241-253, here p. 244.

¹⁵Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region. Postsocialist, post-conflict, post-colonial?* Manchester 2018, p. 1.

My study of the cooperation in RECOM illustrates that *region* is used to denote the common beyond a common state. To use *region* instead of *Yugoslavia* leaves something vague and undefined, thus leaving less possibility of provocation than the concrete reference to the problematic Yugoslav concept, discredited not only by the wars as described above. The term *region* can be understood either sub-nationally, like in the aforementioned consultations in Croatia in 2007, or supranationally as an equivalent for Southeastern Europe, as the Regional Cooperation Council does.¹⁶ Another reading relates to the question of a region with reference to the term *Balkans*.¹⁷ However, *Balkans* is applied rather by perspectives on the region than by people *in* the region – as in my case study.

Ultimately, the term *region* as used by RECOM keeps open how many countries, peoples, territories, and cultures from the former Yugoslavia (and beyond) are connected within it, making it a flexible concept. As soon as actors from more than two countries of the former Yugoslavia were involved in the exchange, RECOM termed it „regional cooperation“. A perspective on regions as a web of connections and human action is offered by Diana Mishkova: „A vessel-like concept of a historical region marked by objective criteria, a cluster of structural and cultural traits or even legacies recedes before a fuzzier, processual and open-ended one. This means shifting the focus of discussion to the social, political, and intellectual mechanisms effecting the materialization of space and borders and, most prominently, to human agency.“¹⁸

Regions as Harbingers of Change

I consider the concept of *region* as the result of processes of respatial-

¹⁶Regional Cooperation Council. URL: <http://www.rcc.int/> (07.09.2017).

¹⁷For which Maria Todorova proposes the concept of „historical legacy“, „which focuses attention on the element of time in order to answer a misleadingly simple question: What is a region? Historical legacy retains valuable features of spatiality while simultaneously refining the vector of time, making it more historically specific.“ Maria Nikolaeva Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford, New York 2009, p. 198.

¹⁸Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*. Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY 2018.

ization after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Respatialization in the territory of the former Yugoslavia takes place mainly as nationalization strategies. RECOM tried to counterbalance these nationalization strategies by a regional cooperation in memory culture.

The initiative is directed against the nationalistic culture of memory in all the countries after Yugoslavia. Specifically, the RECOM activists oppose a view of the wars that is reduced to ethnic attributions of perpetrators and victims. They oppose the sole emphasis on the victims of the majority societies and the denial of the crimes by those responsible for the state. Denisa Kostovicova recognizes in this a common regional consciousness „that allows participants to recognize their common history of conflict, common contemporary and regionwide challenges (foremost among them the marginalization of victims of all ethnicities) and their common future destiny“.¹⁹

I understand the RECOM cooperation as a counterweight to national discourses of power and thus as a transnational, anti-hegemonic project.²⁰ This project was negotiated in the field of memory culture, with RECOM acting as an initiative for a regional „counter memory“.²¹ This counter memory addresses what the official, national history narratives omit: the individual stories of those who suffered, beyond ethnic categories. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith hold that the telling of individual stories is meant to expose the discrepancy between the values of people in a society and the social practice, which represents only a portion of all people.²² Thus, through storytelling, a pluralistic society can be fostered. RECOM therefore promotes the term *region*

¹⁹Denisa Kostovicova, Seeking Justice in a Divided Region. Text Analysis of Regional Civil Society Deliberations in the Balkans. In: International Journal of Transitional Justice 1171 (2017), pp. 154-175, here p. 172.

²⁰Chris. A. Bayly/Sven Beckert/Matthew Connelly/Isabel Hofmeyr/Wendy Kozol/Patricia Seed, AHR Conversation. On Transnational History. In: The American Historical Review 111/5 (December 2006), pp. 1441-1464, here p. 1451.

²¹Aleida Assmann / Sebastian Conrad, Introduction. In: Assmann / Conrad (Eds.): Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices and Trajectories. Basingstoke 2010, pp. 1-15, here p. 3.

²²Kay Schaffer/Smith, Sidonie, Human Rights and Narrated Lives. The Ethics of Recognition. New York 2004, p. 3.

as a container for culture and for value diversity, and as one level in a system of multilevel governance; it also promotes regional activism as a harbinger of change.²³

Although RECOM aimed at an anti-nationalistic counter memory of the Yugoslav wars, the practice of the consultations made it clear that the success of a transnational project is nevertheless essentially dependent on national conditions. Matthias Middell reminds us that the spatial format of a region can only be effective in interaction with other spatial formats.²⁴ The increased relevance of the national level for transnational cooperation is an important empirical result of the consultation process. As Patricia Clavin notes, transnational processes are not about overcoming the national paradigm but about expanding it, contextualizing it, and connecting it with other perspectives.²⁵ Thus, the transnational cooperation in RECOM does not aim at overcoming national realities but at connecting them.

Imagined Regionalism?

An important lesson from the development of the RECOM initiative is that any regional action of memory politics requires accepting the loss of Yugoslavia. Ultimately, RECOM therefore has served as a way not only to deal with the Yugoslav wars and promote a transnational vision of common action, but also to accept that Yugoslavia is history. More specifically, the lessons from my study of RECOM are the use of the term *region* or *regional* for a transnational counter memory of the Yugoslav wars, the admission that a power constellation different from the one known from Yugoslavia is needed, and the acceptance that everyone is also free not to participate in a common project after Yugoslavia.

RECOM has used the term *region* like anybody else does in the former Yugoslavia. We are concerned with an unconscious process of

²³Ulf Engel, Regionalismen, p. 14.

²⁴Matthias Middell, Raumformate - Bausteine in Prozessen der Neuverräumlichung. Leipzig 01/2019, p. 6.

²⁵Patricia Clavin, Defining Transnationalism. In: Contemporary European History 14 (2005), pp. 421-439.

spatialization through vernacular talking and with a conscious process of institutionalization of a spatial order through a regional truth commission. However, the process of validating the spatial format of a region²⁶ on the level of memory politics deemed unsuccessful because RECOM has not (yet) triggered political action.

A political realization of RECOM through governmental cooperation would alleviate the feeling of powerlessness of many civil society activists that has persisted since the wars. More importantly, such a state institution would provide recognition to those who have been denied recognition as victims of the wars in national and international courts. This affects an enormous number of people in the region after Yugoslavia, such as displaced persons, relatives of missing persons, rape victims, camp inmates, and combatants.

²⁶Engel, *Regionalismen*, p. 4.