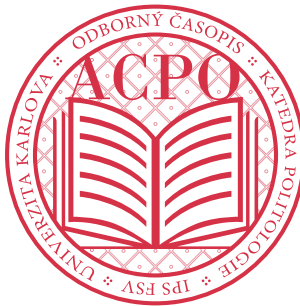


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## Burgers, coffee or bureks?

### A bottom-up perspective on everyday identity consumption, nationalism, and geographies of belonging in contemporary Serbia

Laurent Tournois<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract:

*The last days of the Yugoslav Federation and the nationalist decade that followed brought to the fore negative categorizations and 'ancient' geographies of belonging. Since 2012, the ruling elite have sought to contain nationalism and to rebuild the image of a modern nation using consumption as a political tool by bridging (again) East and West. This contention is grounded in two entangled theoretical perspectives on consumption and national identity building. Adopting a historical narrative scheme, the original material collected in this study from 45 semi-structured customer and problem-centered expert interviews and extensive ethnographic fieldwork contributes to contextualizing and problematizing consumption routines towards McDonald's restaurants, Simit Sarayi, and Starbucks coffee shops. This paper highlights that, daily, individuals have developed their own interpretative space within which to operate, exhibit their identity, and express to whom their affinity goes, leading to cultural paradoxes in certain situations.*

**Key words:** *Identity building; Consumption; Nationalism; Bottom-up perspective; Serbia*

#### Introduction

As paradoxical as it may seem at first glance, during the inception of the collectivist Yugoslav federation, Western symbols such as rock 'n' roll, cartoons, movies, etc. have played a major role in modernizing the nation and building citizenship. During the ethno-territorial reconfiguration that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, while Serbia's leadership made an extensive use of local and historical emblems to signify an independent existence, the growing footprint of McDonald's illustrated the reappropriation of political goals by the nation somehow located at the border of neoliberalism and nationalism. Then, following a decade of struggles over materiality and social identity (see Fowler 2012), the Serbian ruling elite that came to power in 2012 gradually took over the country's 'quest for modernity' along a cosmopolitan axis in order to contain nationalist leanings. In 2017, Ana Brnabić, nominated as Serbia's first female prime minister, bluntly summed up the stakes in her induction speech: "The time before us will show how brave we are to move boundaries," she said. "Now is the moment to make a step forward and take our society, country, and economy into the 21st century." (Gec 2017).

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Pragmatically, the ‘spatial dialectics of modernity’ were oriented towards transforming subjects into consumers thanks to the development of ‘cultural landscapes of consumption’ which aim to, in approximating the domains of affect and built assemblage, create emotional atmospheres that may stimulate the emergence of new forms of civic and cultural life (Miller 2014). It materialized through the frenetic multiplication of urban infrastructure projects such as the Belgrade Waterfront and mediatized the opening of three big shopping malls, as well as the entry of foreign big names such as the cosmopolitan Turkish coffee shop chain Simit Sarayi, against a backdrop of renewed relations between Serbia and Turkey, and the Starbucks company in the heart of the city center that are emblematic of “globalized forms of cultural production and consumption” (see Gotham 2005: 242).

My first argument is that, using consumption as a political instrument, the various political leaders who first succeeded in Yugoslavia and then in Serbia have tried to impede cultural and economic marginalization and fought the positions and roles assigned to the Balkans in Western imaginative geography (see Hammond 2007), the spearhead being the capital city, Belgrade. The underlying rationale is to use material objects as intermediaries between the forces of global economic exchange and people’s ever-changing identities (Gerritsen, Riello 2015).

Moreover, given the ‘protean nature of nationalism’ – defined here as a [geopolitical and symbolic] process of boundary creation and/or preservation (Conversi 1995) and although it has almost vanished from state narratives since 2012 – what about the everyday situations within which nationalism is produced as advocated by several scholars (e.g., Fox, Miller-Idriss 2008; Skey 2009)? Consequently, we shall direct our attention to the sociocultural anchoring of state narratives, located in a timeframe that concerns the country’s recent and remote past. Hence, my second argument is that consumption problematizes resistance and sometimes hostility fuelled by historical and cultural legacies. Assuming that consumption has opened up a space for the political, I also look into the means of contestation or burgeoning counterhegemonic thrusts that state narratives may induce around issues that connect more with identity and way of life than with politically defined territorial parts.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I first contextualize consumption as a political tool within an identity-building active and critical ‘historical process of social construction’ (Ting 2008: 253). I ground its dynamics in a historical narrative scheme conducive to the exploration of the connections between the “natural universe of commodities” and that of individuals “who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization” (Kopytoff 1986: 64). Next, I present the adopted research methodology. The subsequent section explores the historical and cultural geographies of Simit Sarayi’s outlets, as perceived by Belgradians. Simit Sarayi cafés became a space that perplexes; Simit was the ambassador of ‘Ottoman cosmopolitanism’ at its expense. Given its longevity in the Yugoslav and then Serbian market, I here use McDonald’s as a ‘yardstick’. Indeed, the short-lived presence of Simit Sarayi in Belgrade/Serbia must be put in perspective with the more than 30 years of success of the American franchise McDonald’s, which opened its first restaurant in Belgrade (then the capital of Yugoslavia) on March 23, 1988. Finally, I introduce the Starbucks case and discuss what drew the local political elite’s to put a target on its back. Additionally, to further scout about the top-down attempt aiming to politicize a ‘previously un-politicized place’ (until Aleksandar Vučić came to power, ruling governments have been somewhat reluctant to directly interfere in such everyday routines), I specifically delve into the decision taken by local authorities to write the name of Starbucks in both

Latin and Cyrillic. Relying on the ambiguity sparked among potential customers, I speculate on the reasons that may have presided over this decision.

## Contextualizing consumption as a political tool

Scholars have long debated the origins and purposes of consumption, from historians to anthropologists. They agreed that it initially acted as a social emulator and fostered imitation in diverse cultural settings such as China and Europe (McCabe 2014).

From an institutional perspective, consumerism is viewed as a ‘civilizing process’ (Sznaider, 2000), the development and learning path (see Elias 1995) by which “modern European societies have been pacified over the last five centuries and emotional identification between the inhabitants of each society has increased” (Linklater 2004: 4). This argument has been further supported across disciplines, as sociologists suggest that consumption connects the economic and cultural foundations of a society and also significantly contributes to forming both individual and collective identity (Zukin, Maguire 2004). These studies have underlined the importance of building international relations and, broadly speaking, an openness to the world outside the citizens’ sphere of life is a prerequisite for societies aiming to enter into modernity. The activity of literally ‘consuming culture’ is considered here as an enabler.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political elites used consumption as a political instrument to increase their country’s living standards through the affordability of ‘modern consumer goods’. Although coming later than in Western countries, communist countries were not immune to such efforts. However, the advent of a consumer society under openly socialist regimes was far from being homogeneous and followed structurally different paths. For example, it ensued new processes of socio-cultural differentiation and changes in class structure that emerged in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the 1970s and 1980s (see Merkel 1999). During the Brezhnev era in the Soviet Union, mass consumption served as a legitimacy and modernization tool (Chernyshova 2013). Often associated with transition phases and ideological shifts, the rise of consumerism (and the extensive use of advertising) in China has bridged political symbolism and communist indoctrination policies (Zhao, Belk 2008).

One communist country, Yugoslavia, was at the forefront of modernization dynamics. One of the main political upheavals that stained the inception of Yugoslav federation was to break the East-West divide. In 1948, after his country left Cominform, Marshal Tito put in practice the idea of the original-archaic nationality and *terra vergina*: the newborn socialist Yugoslavia became a ‘new continent’, and political geography was the ‘Third Way’ between East and West in place of Balkan backwardness (Zimmermann 2010). But the ‘Third Way’ marked not only one foreign policy orientation but first and foremost “a complex ideology developed in which the cultures of the South Slavic peoples were reinterpreted” (Zimmermann 2013: 133). The intertwining of communist ideals and market-based principles constituted an ‘economy of symbolic goods’ (Bourdieu & Nice, 1980) and provided an intellectual, economic, and political grounding for producing beliefs about the superiority of the Yugoslav model.

In this context, the development of (a) consumption (culture) was, aside from sports, a representative and politicized field, as well as a highly appealing sociocultural phenomenon symbolizing the establishment’s construction of a collective identity and goal of distancing Yugoslavia from other communist countries within and outside the Balkan region. From the mid-1950s, Yugoslav political leadership supported a ‘consumerist lifestyle

of shopping and enjoying' that involved citizens daily through Western, and specifically American, advertising, and sales practices (Patterson 2011). It materialized into American-style supermarkets and later on rock 'n'roll music, which had a long-lasting influence on both local ways of living and musical scenes.

The economic and cultural process of 'getting closer to the Western world' also generated 'ideological dilemmas' (see Malešević 2012) and forced the political elite to balance communist morals and openness to market principles (Duda 2016). These aspects have been widely analyzed in the academic literature, mainly from a historical perspective. From socialist Yugoslavia to post-socialist Serbia, scholars have emphasized both continuity and change in everyday consumption practices (see Marković, 2007), whose present manifestations always mature in extended timeframes as well as their necessary historical socio-cultural anchoring (Erdei 2018).

From the 1960s until today, starting with rock 'n' roll to movies and the Swedish brand IKEA, Western symbols have been an integral part of the ruling elite's Bourdieusian 'political economy of symbolic practices'. As stressed by Erdei (2014: 114), the symbolic power of bringing IKEA to Serbia and particularly the capital city, Belgrade, meant change, modernity, and the "return to 'normal life' with a renewed sense of being part of the world"<sup>2</sup>. This statement is an integral part of the broader ruling elite's political image-building propaganda, both inward and outward, implicitly aiming to strengthen citizens' sense of belonging. It is worth noting that although McDonald's is the only foreign company that has survived the transition from Yugoslavia to Serbia, it remains understudied.

This contends that, while the organization of symbols into evocative representations (Barker 2004) plays a prominent role in individualizing the nation (Billig 1995; see also Bechhofer, McCrone 2013), "the power of these symbols lies in providing us with the means by which to think rather than in compelling us to think certain things" as stressed by Cohen (1996: 812). In other words, the 'rational responses of states' may have little power to predict subsequent citizens' behavior thus carrying the idea that states do not have an "unlimited freedom in manufacturing mass identities" (Best 2011: 996). Furthermore, empirical studies bridging consumption (understood in a wider sense) and identity building are scarce and primarily focus on state narratives and/or inward-looking. Indeed, a country's flag (e.g., Spasić 2017), monuments (e.g., Radović 2011; Borozan 2016), national anthem (e.g., Pavković 2020), and/or a set of burial sites (e.g., Kuzmanović, Mihajlović 2015) have concentrated most scholarly attention so far. Thus, the potential discrepancy between state narratives and human agency offers an opportunity for additional investigation in Serbia with the aim of extending the existing scholarly literature on how national identity is constructed and literally 'consumed' through daily practices in post-communist settings (e.g., Shevchenko 2002; Seliverstova 2017; Polese et al. 2020). Additionally, while I adhere to the claim that, like in East Germany, the very ordinariness of everyday life became a key organizing component of people's identity (Feinstein 2002), I intend to show that consumption culture in Serbia is essentially marked by symbolic and individual distinction contrasted with usefulness and social forms of consuming (see Merkel, Courtois 1997).

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, IKEA opened its first store in Belgrade (then the capital city of the Yugoslav Federation) on 27 March 1991. Contrary to what happened in 1991, when "on the first day, about a hundred customers and curious people waited in line in front of the store's door, and only one in five visitors to this shop left empty-handed, while in the world only one in five buys something" (Domino Magazin 2017), there was no such excitement in 2017 (see Tournois 2020).

The preceding discussion and gaps in existing scholarly literature pave the way for a more thorough investigation of the way(s) the consumption of foreign artifacts manifests as material economic power, practically operating in the media and leisure spaces such as boutiques, bars, and cafés (Zukin 2008), and particularly at McDonald's restaurants, and Simit Sarayi and Starbucks coffee shops. Drawing on Soja (1989), I do not see their outlets as passive, but central to a lively conception of memory-history-space relations. Accordingly, these locations are envisioned as a dialogue between the ruling elite, individuals, and the company and "how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (Soja 1989: 6). In this sense, coffee shops and fast-food restaurants are viewed as testimonies of citizenship in addition to state narratives. Ultimately, the food and beverages they sell have a social use and, as such, can be utilized as "fences or bridges" (Douglas, Isherwood 2021: 12).

## Research methods

I chose mixed methods, that is, a combination of qualitative and semi-quantitative approaches (see Tashakkori, Teddlie, Teddlie 1998). This research methodology is deemed suitable for considering both the multifaceted nature of the research questions, the originality of the context in which the study was conducted, and the interactions therein (Merriam 2002). The latter is backed by data collected in 2018 (April-May) through semi-structured interviews (30-50 minutes) with 45 Belgradians between the ages of 19 and 77 years, whether or not they were customers of Simit Sarayi and/or McDonald's. A respondent-driven sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants. To minimize method bias and to enhance respondent motivation to provide answers (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff 2012), the questions were worded in a simple manner, and in Serbian, the questionnaire was pre-tested, and conversational vs. strict interviewing was employed (Krosnick 1999). Respondents were specifically asked a range of open-ended questions such as "Do you/Would you go for a burger or ice-cream or coffee/tea or cake at McDonald's? Yes/No, why?" as well as "Do you/Would you go for a coffee / tea or cake / *burek*<sup>3</sup>/ *djevrek*<sup>4</sup> at Simit Sarayi? Yes/No, why?". Adding the Turkish coffee shop chain and its associated food products to our empirical investigation aims to critically assess the extent to which it contributes to connecting individuals to each other both within and outside of their distinctive spheres of life (Fregulia 2019). They were also asked to express their opinions on the importance of a company's country of origin and longevity in Serbia in influencing their preferences. The ethnographic (residential) fieldwork, based on participant observation, spanned a 5-year period (2015-2020) up until the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A large proportion of the interviewees held a BA (38.6%), private sector employees dominated (36.4%), and there was gender-balanced participation (Table 1). While maximizing diversity was an objective set for the data collection process, our sample respondents had a slightly higher profile than the average population of the Belgrade region (see Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia [SARS] 2019). This is due to the price positioning of both U.S. and Turkish franchises in Serbia.

<sup>3</sup> A typical Balkan salty pastry filled with cheese.

<sup>4</sup> A ring-shaped bread roll or bagel. Its Turkish name is '*simit*'.

**Table 1: Sample demographics and key descriptives.**

	Level	Percentage*
<b>Age</b>	18-24	25
	25-34	29.5
	35-44	20.5
	45-54	9.1
	55-64	11.4
	65+	4.5
<b>Gender</b>	Male	50
	Female	50
<b>Education</b>	Primary school	0
	High school	25
	Lyceum	25
	BA	38.6
	Master	6.8
	PhD	4.5
<b>Job position</b>	Private sector employee	36.4
	Public sector employee	6.8
	Self-employed	4.5
	Unemployed	6.8
	Housewife	2.3
	Retired	11.4
	Student	29.5
	Other	2.3

**Note:** \* Rounded to one decimal place.

**Source:** *Author.*

As both a regular customer of coffee shops and a social sciences researcher, I implemented a ‘dialogic-discursive’-problem centered expert interview method (see Döringer 2021) to learn the Turkish franchise’s country manager’s and Starbucks café store manager’s perceptions of customers’ consumption attitudes as well as potential difficulties they encountered in conducting business activities in Belgrade on a daily basis. I also implicated conversations with prominent Serbian personalities (author/journalist, essayist, marketing-communication designer) looking for their implicit knowledge to relocate the consumption routines (with a particular focus on McDonald’s) at work from a temporal, political, and socio-cultural standpoint.

Given the expectations raised by the various announcements about the arrival of the Starbucks franchise in Belgrade and because it was postponed several times, a different methodological approach was considered more appropriate. I used a within-case and cross-case analytical method (Yin 2009) at the local level (domestic coffee shop chains, independent cafés, and restaurants)<sup>5</sup>. This enabled uncovering the Serbian incarnation of Starbucks in shedding light on certain aspects of the lifestyles and attitudes that have arisen in the (local) ‘cognitive-cultural economy’ (Shaker, Rath 2019). While I formerly conducted inconspicuous observations, I had informal contact with a variety of customers and wide-ranging patterns of social practices. In addition, I relied on diverse secondary resources such as archival data (corporate websites, online blogs and portals, foreign and local newspaper articles, etc.) as well as on visual materials such as furniture, product displays, price lists, on-site flyers, and advertisements to gather converging evidence and triangulate a given fact (Yin 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Although not explicitly, I relied on previous observations of Starbucks facilities located in capital cities such as Paris and Dubai as I lived in both places.

The research setting, the city of Belgrade and its suburbs (and by extension Serbia), was chosen because it is located between the East and West and represents the climax of a process of merging commercial networks along geographical and cultural lines (Marković 1996). During Tito's regime, the city was renovated to showcase the advent of a new political and social order and was stamped as a "blueprint for modernity" (Le Normand 2014: 25), a role particularly highlighted since the new ruling elite came to power in 2012.

## Burgers or bureks?

### *An important imprint of Westernness on Yugoslav's hybridity*

The uniqueness of the Yugoslav model resided in a socialist market economy, a unique 'economic and political hybrid' whose cultural and material emanations still resonate today (Kanzleiter 2009). Beyond *clichés* of a 'wide and definitive' cultural rift between capitalism and socialism personified by the symbol of the Iron Curtain, in Yugoslavia, the first pillar of the Yugoslav model was the raise of a consumer culture which contributed to stump the ideological demarcation between the East and the West (Scott-Smith, Segal, Romijn 2012). In the 1960s, Americanization was merely an occasional cooperation between Yugoslavia and the United States, but still a geopolitical, cultural, and economic encounter that benefited both countries. On the one hand, at its peak, everyday life was filled with cultural products coming from the U.S., such as cartoons and, broadly speaking, diverse consumption and socialization forms that connected Yugoslavs with a modern lifestyle summed up by Vučetić (2018: 231) as "the Coca-Colonization of Youth'. On the other hand, Yugoslav political elites made use of Westernness as an instrument to support the 'socialism within a human face's philosophy (see Vučetić 2018). This period ended paroxysmatically with the exclusive and successful landing of McDonald's in Belgrade, 1988. The latter found support for the convergence of anti-state and pro-market supporters. As the influence of the (central) state waned, the growing exclusive attachment to one's own ethnic group became palpable in the incapacity of the Yugoslav government to raise a 'pan-Yugoslav consciousness' (Simić 1991). Moreover, the end of the Yugoslav experiment finally epitomized the end of its "'Ottoman legacy', characterized by multinational statehood, decentralization, and regional diversity" (Razsa, Lindstorm 2004: 647).

The collapse of Yugoslavia the official ideology of merging all nationalities into a single market-socialist community encouraged a geocultural division along ethno-nationalist lines. Slobodan Milošević, elected President of the Presidency of Serbia on May 8, 1989, engaged his country in a conflict with former Yugoslav republics under the 'Only unity saves Serbs' nationalist doctrine. Moreover, contrary to other former communist countries that had to manage the difficult transition from a state-controlled to a market economy, in Serbia consumerism survived but was restricted to everyday endeavors to make ends meet. Like in the Soviet Union or in European regions 'without a state', all things being equal, this situation and the presence of additional activators such as memories, myths, language, and symbols, produced the necessary institutional and social preconditions for nation-building (Máiz, Losada 2000).

With the ethno-territorial reconfiguration that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, political elites made extensive use of symbols to signify an independent existence and to define "who are we the people" (Tolz 1998: 993), somehow located at the border



of neoliberalism, modernization, and nationalism. During this period, none would have expected McDonald's, the symbol of Western culture, to fall into the nationalist rubric, although the spread of nationalism is part of a wider Westernization process, as stressed by Conversi (2012). However, this is what happened in Serbia. The U.S. franchise initially symbolized a changing Serbian culture from collectivist Yugoslavia to more individualistic values and practices. Through 'everyday politics', McDonald's progressively removed the original liminal political spaces (for women and young people) and created a new space for citizenship (see Swerts 2017). In making sitting at McDonald's an 'apolitical place' in the sense of politicized from the bottom, it has turned to a highly nationalist space thanks to human agency when Red Star fans asked, 'We have got McDonald's, where is yours?' at Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb during a football game with Dynamo Zagreb in May 1990.

*"There was pride because it [McDonald's] is not in Zagreb and the like. Just proud to have it. Something similar to how we could buy jeans in Trieste, and the Czechs, Hungarians, Bulgarians can't. In a sense, we are more modern, we are more advanced, something like that." (Essayist, 52-year-old, female)*

McDonald's reflected less an 'embracing American-flavored institutions' internal turn free of 'religious fundamentalism' like in Israel in the mid-1990s (Azaryahu 2000) than becoming a modern and 'enlightened' country in contrast to other ethnic groups (in the process of state building) from former Yugoslavia. To some extent, it might clarify how the Golden Arches of McDonald's co-existed with extremism and barbarism on the ground.

### ***Simit Sarayi and the renegotiation of Ottoman past***

As opposed to embracing the nationalism of the 1990s or the *laissez faire* of the 2000s, the Serbian political establishment has progressively created its own rules for a more globalized market integration over the past decade. One of the facets of the ruling elite's political strategy to put a restraining hand on nationalism and build a 'modern Serbia' was rooted in Yugoslav 'cultural hybridity' and the paradoxes of referring to the founding myths of the Serbian nation.

With respect to the former, it was voiced in December 2014 during an interview given to the American television network CNN on the eve of the China-Balkan Summit in Belgrade: Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić seized upon the arrival of the Heads of Government of 16 countries (from China and Central and Eastern Europe) as an opportunity to emphasize that "Many around the world would connect Serbia with some past times, with wars, with terrible times not only for Serbia, but for the whole region. I dare say that Serbia renews its energy. Serbia is again a very open society, a very open place for all our guests." "As former Yugoslavia, we were the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, and I think that many investors should come to Serbia and use our unique position." (RTS 2014). The summit was described by him as "a place where the economies of East and West meet" (Nikolić 2014). Thus, he aims to appropriate the emblematic heritage of Yugoslavia to attract foreign companies implicitly referring to Yugoslav 'Third Way' as a symbol of openness. The latter is linked to Saint Sava (1175-1236), a monk, author and the first Archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who in a letter from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in the spirit of the geohistory and

contemporary geopolitics, defined the position of the Serbs and the region that they inhabit as 'the East of the West' and the 'West of the East' (see Bakić-Hayden 2006). According to the legend, his remains were burned in Vračar by Ottoman commander Sinan Pasha in 1594. The Temple of Saint Sava was built on a site where his remains were torched, and the date of Saint Sava's death (January 27) is celebrated in Serbia as Education Day.

The appearance of the Turkish coffee shop Simit Sarayi in Serbia, therefore, resembled a snub not only to the Western imagination about the "semi-oriental, not fully European, semi-developed' Balkans (Todorova 1997/2009: 235), but also to negative feelings about the Ottoman occupation. Simit Sarayi opened its first Serbian outlet on September 15, 2017, at 80 Kralj Aleksandar Boulevard, in downtown Belgrade. In October 2017, the highly mediatized celebration and encounters in the store between the presidents of Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdogan) and Serbia, (Aleksandar Vučić) left a strong impression that foreign newspapers further highlighted as "the first occasion on which Serbs had received a Turk with such warmth' (Aydintasbas 2019).

Announced several months in advance on the window of one of the franchises' future locations in the heart of the city center "What is being baked in Cika Ljubina? (*Šta se to peče u Čika Ljubinoj?*) associated with its company's corporate claim "Baked with love" (*Pečeno s ljubavlju*) (Fig. 1), their opening enkindled my enthusiasm. On the front door were exhaustively listed the cities the Turkish franchise operates in, from London to New York, Riyadh, Dubai, Berlin, Antwerpen, Stockholm, Baku, etc. Spontaneously, it symbolized 'openness', 'tolerance', and 'diversity' under the banner of cosmopolitanism, food, principally *bureks* and *djevreks*, being one of the domains in which Turkey's Ottoman past is [re] negotiated (Coller 2010).

It appeared rapidly that The Turkish coffee shop chain failed to recruit outside of its core target. Most clientele were non-Serbian and originated from various intersecting Islamic communities. whether Bosnia, Turkey, the Middle East, or the Gulf countries. As Petrović and Reljić (2011) noted, Turkish cultural influence remains constrained to the Muslim population in the Western Balkans, while non-Muslims still expect much effort to be convinced by a country with a rising Islamic identity.

Figure 1: Simit Sarayi's teasing campaign in one of the future key locations in Belgrade city center.



Source: Photo taken by the author.

Progressively, the dominant picture became empty in most, if not all, locations.

*“I went a couple of times with a colleague because it is close to our workplace, and we wanted to have coffee. I like the concept because I think it’s closer to what’s on offer all over the world, but every time we leave it’s always empty, which probably means it will not last long.” (44-year-old, female).*

*“No. I do not know what that is.” I heard this basic reaction from the respondents until saturation. People just passed by like the store didn’t exist in a merely literal sense, illustrating a form of resistance to ‘being with’ and an absence of dialogue between conviviality and community (Neal et al. 2019) and thus failed to co-create [with Belgradians] an urban café sociality (Bookman 2014).*

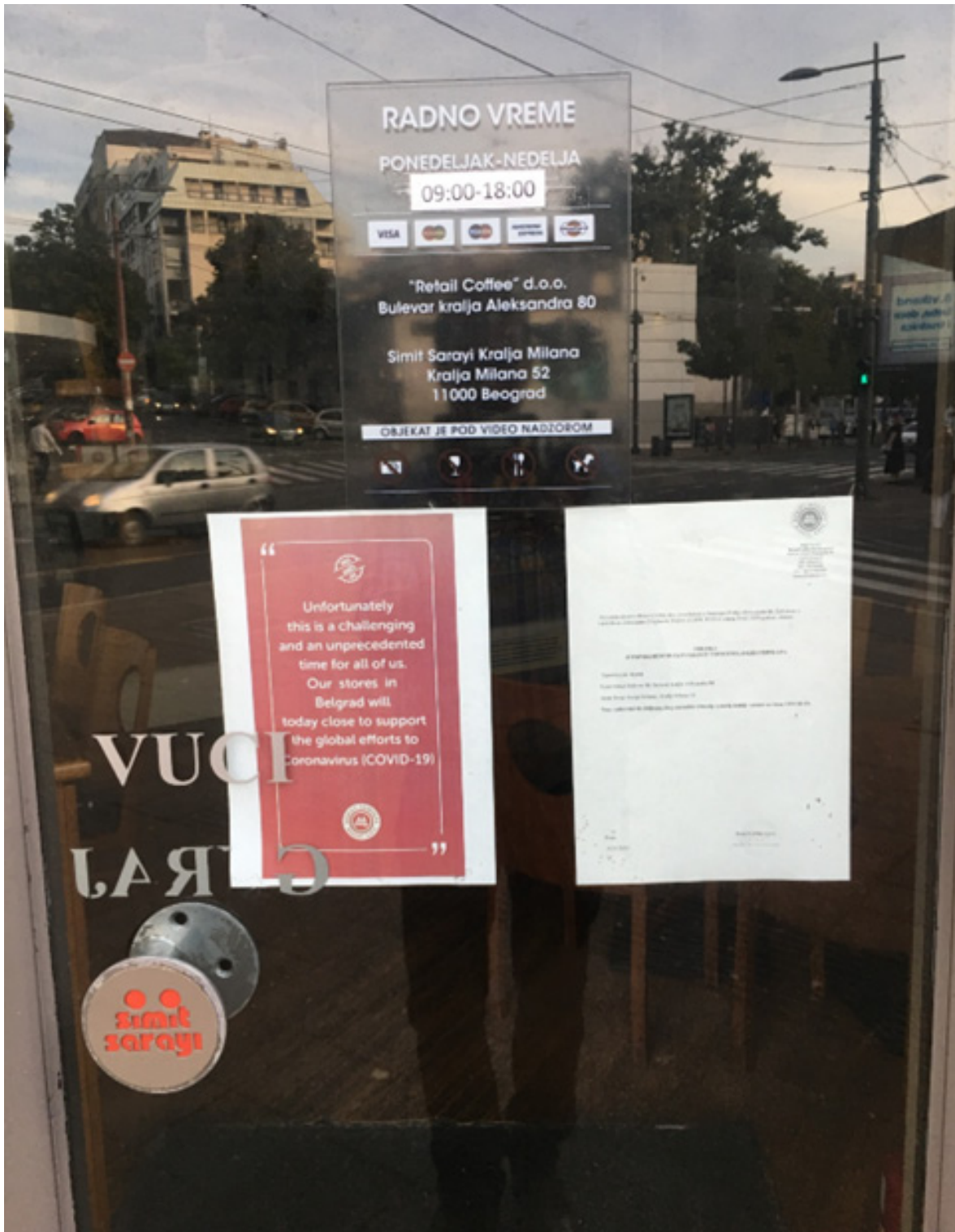
Thus, the various facilities stimulated little everyday interaction between people of different ethnic and religious origins, being neither ‘cosmopolitan’ neither ‘convivial’ (see Freitag 2014). Here, the (psychological) forces at work, consciously and/or unconsciously related to how inhabitants of Belgrade experienced (literally ‘lived with’) the Ottoman legacy and the Balkan geographical and symbolic demarcation daily.

*“I would not go there because I heard bad things from more people. I think they are Turks, and since I do not like their cuisine either, I have no reason to visit. I do not even like Turkish coffee.” (43-year-old, male).*

Such ‘passionate’ reaction illustrates the embeddedness of ‘hot’ and ‘banal’ forms of nationalism (see Calhoun 2017) that pervade people’s daily routines. Inalcik (1996) believes that regarding the whole concept of Ottoman heritage, both nationalist and Marxist historians of the countries in the former Ottoman territory consider Ottoman influence negative. And Yilmaz and Yosmaoglu (2008: 677) to further conclude that “even the mundane elements of life that people share across this vast geography, which might hint at a common cultural denominator or a shared mode of sociability, such as coffee, are now presented and consumed in a way that ensures any ties with the imperial past are severed once and for all”. By producing and reproducing collective animosity, such representation leads to poor mutual knowledge between contemporary Serbs and Turks, and little is known among the contemporaries of these cultures about each other beyond deep-seated historical narratives and crude conceptions, which is also the case with other Balkan nations (see Todorova 2009).

By way of naming, logos, and/or symbols of the brand, the arrival of Simit Sarayi in Belgrade/Serbia revived a relic of history by bringing people and past events back to the present (Courtheyn 2016). Additionally, it highlights the opposition between what is remembered by individuals and underscored by state narratives, aiming to build a new political geography. For many Belgradians, the arrival of the Turkish company recalled past events that shocked and, as the case aims to illustrate, they resisted assimilation but also sparked contradictory and complex reactions (see Simon, Rosenberg, Eppert 2000). In September 2020, all the outlets were closed. I was in close contact with the franchise country manager. He did not blame anyone, simply acknowledging “It is a difficult market. One of the consequences of the pandemic (confinement and closure of all non-essential businesses) finally gave the franchise the opportunity to leave Belgrade with honors; however, this is a challenging and unprecedented time for all of us. Today, our stores in Belgrade will close to support global efforts to Coronavirus (COVID-19)” (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Closing message on the front door of the first outlet to open.



Source: Photo taken by the author.

### ***McDonald's as a frame for (re)building the Serbian collective identity***

The rejection of the Turkish franchise was almost without any concession, as much as membership in McDonald's was total. Opportunistically, I would like to stress that the coming of McDonald's in a communist country received comparatively little exposure in the local media (e.g., Stojanović 1988) while it received substantial interest in Western media with catchy titles such as "Marxists mad for McDonald's" (Diehl 1988) and a war-like rhetoric that accompanied its landing in the communist Yugoslavia with *clichés* (in US newspapers) such as "Big Mac Takes Attack To 1<sup>st</sup> Communist Land" (Shanker, 1988) and "Look out, Yugoslavia, there's a Big Mac attack coming on!" (Echikson 1988). During a period of growing tensions between the Yugoslav republics as a preamble to the unavoidable break-up of the Federation, the last three years – from 1988 to 1991 – of the Yugoslav experiment, as unbelievable as it sounds, exhibit a world-record-breaking trend of the U.S. franchise in Serbia<sup>6</sup>:

While the Turkish franchise reactivated an unwanted past, McDonald's offered an imaginable future and enabled individuals to do many things they were not able to do in the past (individual or small group tables, take-away, women and young people coming to the restaurant on their own, etc.), regardless of whether it is open to criticism (see Ritzer 2002).

*"When I was a kid, about 13 years old, I ran away from school to McDonald's with friends and we threw fries on each other ... It was great!" (Marketing-communication designer, 49-year-old, male).*

*"I liked McDonald's because I could sit alone there and 'in peace' [understood as 'no one bothered me']. I was 20 years old, and it was unthinkable for me to sit in a traditional kafana alone; I could do it in at McDonald's. 'He' set me free in that sense ... Nobody asked me, but to say." (Essayist, 52-year-old, female)*

Both McDonald's and Simit Sarayi disrupted the established order of reasoning and orientation. Although the Americanization of Yugoslav culture had started long before 1988, being in direct contact with the U.S. franchise symbolized the epitome of the East-West divide and permitted Serbian citizens to be part and parcel of a broader 'Westernized dreamworld' (Vučetić 2018) as opposed to Eastern backwardness.

Today, although a vast majority of our respondents have positive feelings towards the U.S. franchise as they are regular customers, some have expressed paradoxical attitudes between nationalist and an 'East-West epistemological convergence of humanism' (see He 2013) role model. When asked about the importance of the country of origin of a company, the interviewee replied openly:

<sup>6</sup> In 1989, restaurant 'Slavija' is a world record holder with 2,046,014 guests served.

In 1990, restaurant 'Bezistan', the second restaurant opened in Belgrade city center, is the first McDonald's in the world that in one year served more than 3 million guests/ became the only McDonald's in the world to have served more than three million guests in one year - more precisely 3,585,554. It also holds the world record with 16,823 guests served in one day - March 12, 1991.

In 1991, 2,816,206 guests were served in 'Bezistan' (McDonald's, 2021).

*“I don’t care about the origin, but it does matter to me that the brand is honest and trades legally all over the world. Though I honestly avoid buying brands that I associate with bad politics, for example, I avoid Turkish and American brands because of the bombing and years of slavery. I wouldn’t go to Simit Sarayi because I know that it is a Turkish brand, and, I as just told you, I don’t like to give money to people who ruled all of Serbia for five hundred years.” (31-year-old, male)*

Would it mean that Belgradians have finally made theirs the categorization that is the ‘modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan West’ (Serbs) in contrast to the ‘despotic’ and ‘backward’ Orient (Simit/Turkish) (e.g., Said 2004, 2014)? The reality may be more subtle, as illustrated by what the preceding respondent added.

*“In addition, I know that they are on good terms with the SNS [ruling party in Serbia], which automatically gives me a bad impression about the place.” (31-year-old, male)*

This opinion is supported by another interviewee:

*“The origin of the brand is important to me, because I have certain expectations from the company from which I buy something. I want to know that what I get is not stolen, that workers are paid normally, and that they have [good] working conditions. I am probably the only person in Serbia who does not want an iPhone, for example, because I am horrified by what they do to their workers outside of America. “I wouldn’t go there because I watched that entire process when they came to Serbia. That entire situation is very disagreeable to me because politics is involved, because I think that is the only reason why they opened that chain here.” (36-year-old, male)*

Along another layer of sense of belonging, most of our participants imaginatively stood for the public-urban space they lived in through a narrative about ‘others’ – Simit Sarayi, that is, the Turkish. To some extent, the ‘Simit Sarayi experience’ has exposed Belgradians’ encounters with their city’s ‘pretended’ multicultural character, at least so far. An informant provided an interesting comment that somewhat contested Belgrade’s current perceived state:

*“I stopped by a few times, and I would again. I support the world chains that come to us, because Belgrade is starting to look like a metropolis again.” (30-year-old, female).*

This issue should be of particular concern given the increasing number of foreign companies aiming to penetrate the Serbian market, like the American coffee shop chain Starbucks, in order to transform their locations into places of 'jouissance' instead of places without charm or even as receptacles of meanings of some 'fundamentalism' usually associated to the 'Other' (Žižek 1997).

## Starbucks acclaimed from below, politicized from above

### *Starbucks, the 'new' bridge to the West/World*

*"If I were to take Starbucks, which does not exist in Serbia, as an example, and open it now, I would probably take it, even if it has not existed in Serbia for only a month. On the other hand, McDonald's has been present in Serbia since '88, when I visited it for the first time with my parents, and it means 30 years of tradition to me." The longevity of a brand is an advantage if it is accompanied by positive opinions and criticism." (39-year-old, male)*

The brand's symbolism preceded its arrival in Belgrade. Well before its official opening, the franchise got positive attention on social networks as illustrated by tweets from 'frustrated' and pleading would-be consumers, aiming to build a sense of 'cosmopolitan cool' (Bookman 2013), or explicitly escape to 'there' from Novi Sad to Belgrade, or as an assertion of the 'connectedness of here', or implicitly to renew the Starbucks experience as both an enclosed space and a gate to reaching an alternative '(Western) way of life' (Smith Maguire, Hu 2013).

*God, I wish we had Starbucks in Belgrade.  
— not a perfect soldier (@allisonargented), July 2, 2009.*



... i molili kompaniju da dođe u Srbiju.



Source: Dimitrijević (2019).



After being postponed several times, the opening of the world's biggest and most well-known coffee shop chain, Starbucks, in Serbia took place on Monday April 15, 2019, in the Rajičeva Shopping Center on the main commercial street of Belgrade. With 175 square meters and more than 140 places, the outlet aimed at (progressively) offering its guests all Starbucks 'cult favs',<sup>7</sup> such as the Caffe/Vanilla Latte, Pumpkin Spice Latte, Java Chip Frappuccino®, Hot Chocolate, and Chai Tea Latte, among others.

"We want to be a part of the everyday life of the people who live here, to be able to enjoy not only coffee, but also a place where they will be able to work, love, live, meet and be a part of something bigger. That is the essence of Starbucks – people, passion, love for life and connection", said Adam Mularuk, President/head of Starbucks at AmRest Holdings SE, who is the company's representative of the Central European region (Al Jazeera 2019) thus echoing the hindrances and expectations of potential customers.

Contrary to what has been written in some media, the reception was not mixed: I saw queues of over 20-30 people in the mall forecourt, and it took several days for me to have the patience to wait and finally enter the 'holy grail'. Unlike in Western countries, where active people usually grab a cup of coffee on their way to work in the early morning, core clientele comes later and is composed of high-purchasing power young active people taking a break, tourists, and youngsters sharing a moment together after school hours<sup>8</sup>.

What came out of the conversations with the Starbucks manager is that the facility also became a 'third' or more likely a 'second place' (in a literal sense) for senior people but who do not consume<sup>9</sup>. After further exploring this "embarrassing situation for our franchise store but ...," it appeared that some of these people were 'regulars' and the coffee shop functioned as a 'home' that smoothed aging in the city, principally by being reachable (physically but not financially), giving them opportunities to be socially involved (Hutchinson, Gallant 2016). I politely asked one of these persons about their attitude ('sitting without drinking'), which would not be allowed in any other café or restaurant in the city. He replied, "Why not? They can afford it; they have money." Could these people be considered the 'losers' of the transformation that started in the early 2000s? Possibly. However, they are not passive, thus illustrating a conclusive final break with collectivist well-being.

### ***Starbucks and/or Старбакс?***

Unlike the Turkish franchise Simit Sarayi, the first Starbucks outlet to open in one of the countries that made up Yugoslavia was not endorsed at the state level but at the local level. The day before, a grand opening was held for VIP guests. Beside a Cannes Film Festival-style crowd control stanchion with velvet rope, red carpet, champagne, and a chamber orchestra playing today's music hits such as Adele and the Black-Eyed Peas, a selected happy few from Serbia and abroad were the first to try the company's caffeinated beverages and to notice that the Starbucks name was also written in Cyrillic on the main window (Fig. 3).

<sup>7</sup> This expression was coined by ... as per Delish website – Koman, Lalomia (2021).

<sup>8</sup> At this stage, the price of the various beverages seems not to be a brake on consumption.

<sup>9</sup> This facility is composed of three areas, one of them being located inside the shopping mall and therefore not subject to direct supervision from the coffee shop staff.

Figure 3: The opening ceremony.



Source: Photo taken by the author.

At first glance, it looked like a local avatar of a famous franchise. To whom is it addressed? Russians coming to visit the capital city, given that in Russia, Starbucks is written both in Latin and Cyrillic script? Or Serbs from smaller towns on a trip to Belgrade? Assuming that Serbs and Russians share similar identity features and that the latter may translate into similar purchasing behaviors is a patronizing shortcut. Serbs are probably closer to Bulgarians, while Starbucks has not written its name in Cyrillic in the capital city of Sofia.

During the opening ceremony, Belgrade Deputy Mayor Goran Vesić declared: “I am especially happy that they accepted my request that the inscription, in addition to Latin, also be in Cyrillic, because that means that they have shown that they respect our country, our language and culture.” In this way, we have shown that even big world brands can adapt to our market” (Pečić 2019).

This statement echoes the process of ‘glocalizing’ Starbucks. Nevertheless, the facility has neither a particular interior design nor a historical aesthetic to potentially suit local customers, as in other countries once new to the brand, such as Sweden. Moreover, contrary to in other cities where coffee and coffee shops are an integral part of their culture, such as in Turkey (e.g., Akarçay 2012), the various coffee categories consumed in world chains such as McCafé (the first entrant on the Serbian coffee market in 2008) or Starbucks has not altered the coffee consumption dynamics, i.e., replaced the local coffee type (literally ‘homemade coffee’ or *domaća kafa* as opposed to ‘Turkish coffee’); most local coffee shops already propose a wide assortment of both local and various internationally-inspired

versions. It is widely accepted that it is usually the prerogative of marketing professionals “to monetize politically sensitive topics by creating conflict, knowingly renouncing large groups of consumers, and giving fodder to political extremes’ (Ulver 2021: 1).

Here, local authorities put on the dress of marketers and used rhetoric that potentially created a discursive misalignment between Belgrade inhabitants and the company’s motto, as expressed by the region representative: “... That is the essence of Starbucks – people, passion, love for life and connection’ (Al Jazeera 2019). It puts into question contemporary Serbia and the West. It looked like a conservative decision, binarily illustrating the necessary but not assumed transformations occurring in the Serbian cultural landscape and discourses on collective identity tainted with the Slavophil mood (see Malinova 2012). One interviewee typified the following:

*“To maintain consistency in the performance where patriotism is emphasized, until when, as it is estimated, a part of the electorate cares a lot. At the same time, those who do not care whether the name will be in Cyrillic will certainly not look with disgust at the whole thing.” (Author/ journalist, 42-year-old, male).*

Such attitudes may reinforce the divisions that exist in diverse societies between ‘neo traditionalists’ and ‘Westernizers’ (e.g., Hnatiuk 2006), as illustrated in the mixed comments it has generated. They ranged from “Why Cyrillic, so it doesn’t look like Starbucks anymore? I wouldn’t even recognize if they were if I hadn’t seen your post”, “Why not! Cyrillic as the perfect alphabet will enrich Starbucks”, “It’s good with and without Cyrillic! I like everything! I cannot wait for Starbucks to come to Novi Sad<sup>10</sup>!”, “Good thing he did not open office shoes. Imagine that it says office shoe above” to “Disaster is this with Cyrillic ... peasantry and distaste on the level!” (Pečić, 2019). One of these commentators rightfully asked: “how would it look like to write Apple Store (Епл Стор), Tommy Hilfiger (Тому Хилфигер), Timberland (Тимберленд), or McDonald’s (Мекдоналдс) in Cyrillic?” All these brands operate in Serbia, and none have ever been written in Cyrillic.

Consequently, history seems to be repeating: such a statement may lead to stereotyping of the Serbian market, while the political elite desperately tries to get rid of the past. During the civil war that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia, such stigmatization felt under the orientalist rhetoric of ‘Balkan mentality’, ‘Balkan primitivism’, ‘Orthodoxy’, and was progressively deployed not just by strangers but by the same persons whom it is intended to describe (Bakić-Hayden, Hayden 1992).

## Conclusion

The consumption behaviors that were examined in this paper are part of broader ‘shared dialogue’ between Serbian political elites and their citizens and evolving practices from Yugoslavia to independent Serbia: on the one hand, the underlying rationale is to emancipate from cultural and economic marginalization and to contain nationalism and, on the other hand, individuals’ responses to political and material conditions are viewed as

<sup>10</sup> Novi Sad is the second-biggest town in Serbia.

a way to connect to the Western sphere of life but also to build boundaries between “us” and “them” in order to structure group identity (Yan 2012). Specifically, I intend to emphasize the intricate and multifaceted bonds between everyday consumer performances and the ways in which they embody or not state narratives and symbolic geographies of belonging, remembrance, and (collective/individual) aspirations which have been little or not addressed in existing research, particularly with respect to foreign contemporary artefacts. These goals arise from the conceptual argument grounding a dialogic approach that is made of “a dialogue with various pasts, presents and (envisioned, anticipated, planned, and evolving) futures, and formed by a multiplicity of geographical connections that can never formulate a steady holistic identity” (Blazek, Suska 2017: 48). In practice, and to paraphrase Callahan (2006), the ‘Serbian nation’ stems less from the ideology of its leaders than through common performances such as consumption practices. The main contributions of this study are summarized as follows.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, the public did not adhere to the Serbian state narratives about collaboration with the current Turkish government as a vehicle to an increased ‘openness’ of Serbian culture. Through everyday consumption, Belgradians have expressed to whom their affinity goes while at the same time they have adopted a Bourdieusian view in rejecting the ‘mental structures and common principles of vision and division, forms of thinking’ imposed by the state (Bourdieu 2018). In response to the authoritarian and neoliberal orientation of the Serbian political establishment progressively put in place by Aleksandar Vučić since 2012, individuals’ attitudes towards the Turkish coffee chain also accentuated the feeling of being marginalized from political life and hence looked beyond state discourses for spaces of contestation (see Parnell, Robinson 2012). Following this line of reasoning, Belgradians may have felt deposed of their memory or history (to some extent, a form of cultural recognition) and, consequently, their national identity. To some extent, this situation illustrates Etzioni’s statement that “globalist ideals and institutions have progressed more rapidly than public support for them, leading to a major backlash” (Etzioni 2018: 29). It also calls attention to the limitations of top-down identity-building strategies in Serbia since the early 2000s. In this regard, the story of McDonald’s is insightful, for the most part during the pivotal period of the late 1980s to early 1990s: daily, individuals have developed their own interpretative space and, in short, while the ruling elite ‘collectivized nationalism’, citizens ‘personalized it’ (Cohen 1996). Paradoxically, the progressive McDonaldization of Serbia while it ‘buried the Yugoslav ideal of ‘brotherhood and unity’, more than three decades later, it became part of people’s everyday lives in Serbia/Belgrade, that is to say it ‘glocalized’ thus challenging the cultural imperialism (Beck 2003) and cultural homogenization (Roudometof 2015) theses. These findings open up spaces for further investigation.

The cases empirically examined in this paper ‘collectively’ illustrate how identity-building imaginative geographies are voiced by citizens in their dialogue with the ruling elite. The politicization of consumer culture using symbolic foreign brands has connected Belgradians with an undesirable past in the case of the Turkish franchise and/or, in a positive sense, to ‘faraway’ places and reinstalled ‘new’ cultural relations that are emblazoned by globalization, thanks to the meanings associated with Starbucks (and early on, McDonald’s) and the role of human agency in this process. The Starbucks experience in Belgrade added a multicultural flavor to the consumption of enjoyment and a search for a Western middle-class image for locals, such as franchise customers in Taiwan (Shiau 2016). Serbian post-communist inclusion/exclusion consumption practices in shaping nationhood could

possibly be encapsulated in the Balkan metaphor of *Bosanski lonac* or Bosnian stew<sup>11</sup>. In short, this culinary specialty is synonymous with a place where three elements simmer over low heat, these elements being otherwise incompatible: one of them is always the cause of a good soup (a strong and individualistic civil society that has emerged along McDonald's rising imprint); one is completely unnecessary (in the sense of 'it does not exist' (see Tournois, Đerić, 2021); Ottoman cosmopolitanism); one is in favor of the one who fries (Starbucks as a symbol of multiculturalism and openness to the 'modern' world) the soup.

This paper also draws attention to certain psychological dynamics which may influence both political and cultural spaces that can be seized through the state of 'resentment' (Greenfeld 1992; Lekakis 2017). This suggests that this process may have started out in times of Yugoslavia with the idealization of the Western world and, more specifically, America, ensued with nation building attempts and extreme, that is, nationalist sentiments, went on with a process of comparison with expected Europeanization benefits, ensued in the perception of inequality, and ultimately led to contrasted feelings. Other reading grids are obviously conceivable, but the point I would like to make here is that among the same individual may coexist both a sense of pride nurtured by a feeling of belonging to a 'Westernized world' and animosity, emotionally nourished by stigmas as well as a deeply embedded demand for cultural recognition. After the Milošević era coming to a peaceful end in 2000, Serbia faced a "heavy moral burden" (Golčevski, von Engelhardt, Boomgaarden 2013: 119) and had to rebuild itself as a 'new state'. It is widely accepted that, whether desired or experienced, state formation often leaves a legacy of grievances and identities shaped in part by narratives and experiences of historical wounds and victimization (Wilmer 2018). These aspects have to be taken into account in any analysis dealing with post-Yugoslav Serbia, besides an East-West dichotomy (it would be probably more relevant to speak about the West in the East and its daily symbolic reverberations), within the Balkan region itself, around adhesion to supranational and/or national identities concerns.

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<sup>11</sup> Vukajlija (2013).

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