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Queer Repetitions? LGBTIQ+ Communities and (Post-)Yugoslav History

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Introduction

A commonly used indicator for measuring the level of democracy is the legislative framework on LGBTIQ+ issues such as de-criminalization, anti-discrimination, and marriage equality (Slootmaeckers et al. 2016). Those wishing to tell the his-/her-/stories of LGBTIQ+ communities therefore often heavily rely on preconfigured historiographies of democratization and their subsequent teleologies of progress (Encarnación 2014). At the same time, the 'backlash' on LGBTIQ+ communities is interpreted as a result of anti-democratic tendencies instead of a profound ideological operation (Desperak 2021). This holds particularly true for the context of the so-called "post-socialist transitions", where the LGBTIQ+ community represents, and figures as, a coherent, progressive actor of transformation which continually moves towards liberal democracy – regardless of the multiplicity of voices within these communities. As a result of this flattening one-size-fits-all category being applied, the socialist past(s) of LGBTIQ+ communities have become much more difficult – if not impossible – to access: these communities seem to have become historical agents only in the light of system change, or, they are portrayed as eternal wanderers in the forever liminal stage of postcommunism where democracy is both "a goal to be reached and a lost object" (Buden 2010: 22). Such a patriarchal environment, where normative institutions describe queer[2]

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[2] Following the arguments on identity raised by Brubaker, Cooper (2000), I will use *queer* as a category of analysis rather than a category of practice for which I designate either LGBTIQ+ or individual labels such as gay, lesbian, or trans etc.

communities as perpetually "in need of paternalistic guidance before they acquire full political agency" (Rexhepi 2016: 33), leads to a situation that inherently limits and thus undervalues queer (historical) agency. Eventually, the socialist dimension of LGBTIQ+ lives withdraws, like a shadow of prehistory, behind the curtain of a seemingly more authentic post-socialist (but not sexual) liberation in the 1990s.

At the same time, however, there is a lively critique of supposedly Western hegemonic concepts overtaking queer discourses in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. This critique has either targeted so-called neo-colonialist and hegemonic attitudes rooted in institutions of the Global North – which represent queer politics and socialism as mutually exclusive (Popa 2021: 11) – or it has focused on transfers of anti-queer sentiments from the West to the (South-)East such as is the case regarding the so-called TERF[3] wars (Bilić 2022: 168–169). Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (2011) have creatively engaged with these debates by reformulating the question of LGBTIQ+ history along both spatial (East/West) and temporal (socialist/post-socialist) trajectories. In their effort to understand political and social transformation – from socialism to "what comes next" (Verdery 1996: 38) – Mizielińska and Kulpa put a "Western" timeline, which represents the teleology of LGBTIQ+ evolutionism, in juxtaposition with the possibility of a queer temporality. Problematizing this relationship between the binaries of East/West and socialism/post-socialism, Mizielińska and Kulpa rightfully ask the question of "why certain models (notably Western/American) are familiar to 'all' […] and why 'local' narrations of lesbian and gay emancipation will be seen as, precisely, 'local' and not 'universally' recognised" (Mizielińska, Kulpa 2011: 17). Although their approach tries to conceptualize a different geotemporality for the purpose of a more diverse queer history, it overlooks the vital processes of (self-) historicization in LGBTIQ+ communities and related issues of queer (historical) agency and collective action. As such, I would argue that instead of looking for essentializing differences in epistemological positions ('West vs. East'), the question needs to be formulated differently: How can we meaningfully integrate LGBTIQ+ experiences from the socialist context with contemporary understandings of queer lives and queer activism? And, why should we? Instead of understanding queer history as a teleology of progress, as a purely technical progression in history, or as a kind

[3] TERF stands for Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminism and designates a tendency in feminism that seeks to actively exclude trans women from womanhood. It makes use of trans-exclusionary politics and is a specific form of transphobia (see Ahmed 2015).

of development towards an ever more abstract freedom, I want to propose a different understanding of the historical dimension of queer activism through the prism of *repetition*.

This experimental approach will allow for an understanding of queer history through the (re)appearance of specific tropes and issues at multiple points in time. Therefore, this essay will not merely circle around conceptual questions such as "development" or "retrogression", but rather, it shall creatively engage with the queer re-imagining of *repetition* as a methodological device in historical research. By analyzing LGBTIQ+ communities in (post-)Yugoslav history, I want to demonstrate why a queer understanding of repetition can answer this problem of (self-)historicization and agency across the timeline of societal change which, in transitologist approaches[4], is usually reduced to *democratization*. In order to provide a brief overview, I will focus mainly on Slovenian-language sources from LGBTIQ+ communities and complement these occasionally with sources from different post-Yugoslav states. Bearing in mind that this selection of materials is necessarily limited, I have chosen to give preference to a concise analysis allowing for, on the one hand, a systematic approach in tracing queer repetitions and, on the other hand, an account of the variety and broadness of queer issues among different communities.

Repetition as a Device for Historical Research

The first issue to be addressed in the quest for conceptualizing *queer repetitions* is the question as to how repetition as a device for historical research can meaningfully integrate LGBTIQ+ experiences into a broader history (and historiography) of (Post-)Yugoslavia without simply reducing them to agents of democratization. In historical research, *repetition* has its own tradition as a device for approaching and studying the past. However, it remains rather marginal and out-of-date in contemporary academic debates. Most references to *repetition* in history and historical research are usually found in debates on political theory or philosophy of history (Toynbee 1948, Trompf 1979). Instead of focusing on the debates on repetition in history, I want to inquire about the quality of *repetition* as an analytical tool for understanding specific processes in queer history. Therefore, I do not intend to answer the question whether history repeats itself as such; nor do I want to bring forward a methodological argument on causal patterns or correlations (Collier, Mazzuca 2006). Rather, the aim will be to focus on the question whether *repetition* can be made a productive lens for making

[4] Here, I refer to debates such as in Horvat, Štiks (2014).

sense of queer history across space and time. For the following analysis, I am therefore relying on two conceptual blueprints of *repetition* which are presented by philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Kōjin Karatani, respectively. Following a short theoretical sketch, I will be subsequently focusing on more recent examples which tend to underestimate queer agency for the sake of a neatly self-contained narrative of post-socialist democratization.

In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek analyzes the historical legacy of Jacobin revolutionary terror and begs the question whether "there [is] a way to *repeat* it in today's different historical constellation [and] to redeem its virtual content from its actualization" [original emphasis] (Žižek 2017: 164). Following a series of political, historical and philosophical arguments, he comes to the polemic conclusion stating that "our task today is precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror" (Žižek 2017: 174). What does this reference to repetition mean and why is it helpful? Here, Žižek refers to what he considers to be of vital importance for any kind of historical analysis: By "reinvention", or "repetition", he means that historical agency does not only take place on the superficial layer of an event, but that it rather relates to what any specific historical moment actually entails, and how the consequences of this specific moment create new, tangible realities for those that engage with it:

> It is at this level that one should search for the decisive moment of a revolutionary process: say, in the case of the October Revolution, not the explosion of 1917–18 […] but the intense experimentation of the early 1920s, the desperate (often ridiculous) attempts to invent new rituals of daily life (Žižek 2017: 174).

Therefore, the decisive characteristic of a "revolutionary" moment in history, according to Žižek, cannot simply be traced back to the empirical surface of its event ("the explosion"), but rather to what its real-life consequences mean for all those that are involved and eventually affected ("the intense experimentation"). Žižek's short analysis of revolutionary terror, I would argue, already encapsulates the core meaning of repetition as an analytical tool: Looking for repetition in history, therefore, means taking its precise "revolutionary" moment as a vantage point and tracking its actual consequences in contemporary politics.

In his collection of essays *History and Repetition*, Kōjin Karatani makes a much more radical claim by saying that "history exists within a kind of repetition compulsion" (Karatani 2012: 1). Unlike Žižek, who emphasizes the consequential nature of repetition, Karatani makes use

of a Marxist theoretical underpinning in order to show how repetition is something that is inherently linked to historical processes. His investigation of Japanese political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries concludes with the reminder that repetition compulsion is a necessary manifestation of precisely those problems of the past that remain unsolved and that therefore find their way to the future. This "return of the repressed", Karatani argues, "can be seen as the essential characteristic of state and capital, which structure the modern world" (Karatani 2012: 29). However, very much like Žižek, Karatani is not merely interested in the outward appearance of repetition as a historical event but rather in the underlying structures that path the way for this repetition to resurface at different points in time: "Repetition in history does not signify the recurrence of the same event, for repetition is possible only in terms of *form* (structure) and not *event* (content)" (Karatani 2012: 2). What makes his argument worth considering in relation to repetition is that Karatani sees it as an absolutely necessary prerequisite for historical and political analysis: by focusing on repetition across space and time, one can identify "the essential point […] of subsequent phenomena" (Karatani 2012: 34). Both Žižek and Karatani, therefore, uncover the analytical possibility of investigating repetition which can either point to the consequential characteristics of a "revolutionary" moment in history (Žižek) or to the "unfulfilled" potential of its past (Karatani).

A more contemporary example of this focus on the relationship between past and present through the prism of repetition can also be found in Bojan Bilić's analysis of transphobia in Serbian leftist activism. Instead of opening up their political spaces for trans people as one of the most marginalized groups of society, some self-declared leftist actors in Serbia, such as *Marks21*, actively joined TERF narratives in order to hide their own antifeminist tendencies behind the mask of a false engagement for the rights of women. Bilić's investigation meticulously shows how exactly these 'leftist' initiatives, despite their claim to promote the causes of marginalized groups, had failed to "build upon the legacy of Yugoslav socialism, which tried to destabilise the gender binary through (at least) constitutionally equalising the political, social, and economic status of men and women" (Bilić 2022, 170-171). Similar to Karatani and Žižek, Bilić shows that the progressive potential of historical legacies could inform and inspire contemporary politics and activism. In other words, a productive engagement of contemporary politics with the historical legacies of activism in Yugoslav socialism could not only uncover progressive ideas of the

past, but also demonstrate their consequential relevance for contemporary issues, i.e. their unfulfilled potential.

However, I would like to take Žižek's and Karatani's arguments only as a starting point for the following experimental investigation as I do not want to overstretch the theoretical use of the notion of *repetition*. Rather, I wish to adjust it to the concrete context of queer activism in the (post-) Yugoslav space. In order to do so, it is important to consider that queer discourses in the (post-)Yugoslav space have also always accommodated larger narratives (e.g. constitutional recognition, democratization, minority rights) within which activists tried to articulate their political demands and societal relevance. Therefore, discourses on, and of, queerness substantially varied following changes throughout different socio-political and economic contexts. For the (post-)Yugoslav case, it will become clear that gay and lesbian activists from the 1980s formulated their demands for liberation and emancipation in a different language compared to activists in the 1990s and later. This difference is not merely a formal issue of language but has significant repercussions for understanding the contingent environments within which meaning was created and negotiated among particular actors such as LGBTIQ+ groups. Incorporating larger narratives such as democratization or national statehood into queer activism substantially transformed the claims and aims of queer activists in (Post-) Yugoslavia. In order to gain insight into the long-term paths, structures, and underlying motivations of queer history, it will therefore be of use to identify recurring topics and tropes in the form of repetitions. The very fact that *repetition* is able to uncover precisely those moments in history that are not simply retelling events (*faktografija*) but point to the substantial change which incurred from specific historical processes informed by queerness, will bring back the relevance of agency to LGBTIQ+ communities.

By switching the emphasis from "agents of transformation" to "agents for queerness", we can conceptually liberate the agency of LGBTIQ+ communities from a very narrow understanding – namely, as actors which really only make sense in processes of democratization – to a broader and more inclusive conceptualization which takes into consideration the socialist dimensions of queer liberation and thus incorporates its historicization. What does this ultimately mean for historical research? First, we do not have to rely on fuzzy categories such as "civil society" to make sense of LGBTIQ+ communities in the history of socialism and post-socialism (see Bilić 2011). Second, knowledge about (Post-)Yugoslavia which stems from the experience of queer groups and individuals can be linked to more

general social and political developments and thus meaningfully incorporated into broader historical research and historiography without necessarily losing its queer(ing) dimension. Third, queer groups and individuals can themselves find a meaningful place by (self-)historicizing their legacies with (but also beyond) queerness.

A Queer History of (Post-)Yugoslavia

The contemporary history of LGBTIQ+ communities in Eastern Europe is generally tainted by recent homophobic, transphobic, and "anti-gender" politics towards these communities in neo-fascist and hyper-conservative contexts such as for example Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Serbia (see Bogaards, Pető 2022). In addition, however, we are also confronted with a not-so-hidden academic tradition of presenting Eastern Europe as "Europe's unruly homophobic Other" (Bilić et al. 2022, 6). Sexuality in Eastern Europe is often conceived as more patriarchal, more rigid and prude when compared to Western Europe. As a result, in order to counteract these Balkanist tropes, a growing literature on queerness in Yugoslavia emerged that resonates not only with a growing usefulness of the queer(ing) approach (Cohen 1997, Marshall et al. 2014) but also with innovative forms of finding and expressing queer voices in the case of Yugoslavia – which is rediscovered by researchers and activists alike. But how could a queer history of (Post-)Yugoslavia look like? When the Viennese feminist lesbian activist Gudrun Hauer first visited Ljubljana in 1985, she was surprised to find that both feminism and homosexuality were highly visible and existed as political issues in Yugoslav socialism – to her astonishment, as she writes, "even without state repression"[5] (Hauer 1985, 25). These preconceptions resonate with well-known tropes of an enlightened West versus an ever so closeted, uptight, and ultimately retrograde (South-)East.

Indeed, gays and lesbians in Yugoslavia's 1980s also organized within broader coalitions including pacifist and environmentalist groups which sought to tackle the hegemony of an older generation of heteronormative, patriarchal, and conservative socialist functionaries and institutions. This early queer activism was multi-issue and multi-sited because it inherently reflected the federalized nature of the socialist state. Franko Dota has described debates on homosexuality among legal scholars in Slovenia and Yugoslavia in great detail and has argued that they provided the necessary environment for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Croatia,

[5] All translations are mine if not otherwise stated.

Slovenia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina (Dota 2017: 250–285). This unfinished decriminalization, however, was the reason as to why early queer activism had to both rally for a complete decriminalization of homosexuality in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, while also pushing for the integration of a non-discrimination clause to the Yugoslav constitution. As Jasmina Tumbas has suitably argued, the 1980s represent the "most sexually transgressive decade of socialist Yugoslavia" (Tumbas 2022, 150). Others like Marina Gržinić and Saša Kesić have shown how queer communities in Yugoslavia have not only successfully formed political interest groups but also actively engaged in a quest for their own visual identity as expressed in the many forms of artistic and cultural productions stemming from queer contexts (Gržinić 2008, Kesić 2021). Most importantly, these early queer groups in Ljubljana were in close contact with other alternative art movements such as Neue Slowenische Kunst, Novi kolektivizem or FV 112/15 (Ilić 2021).

Although this early activism is often portrayed as a simple appearance of Ljubljana's underground scene in the 1980s, gay and lesbian activists in Ljubljana provided substantial emotional support and solidarity by creating spaces and opening up new channels of communication – also for those members of the LGBTIQ+ community which did not have the privilege of participating in Ljubljana's urban life. The archive of Slovenia's first gay group which emerged in 1984, called *Magnus*, hosts a collection of letters from the 1980s testifying to the enormous resonance that the activists had achieved across Yugoslavia in as little as five years of their activism. The establishment of these concrete queer spaces was what both Magnus and LL (*Lezbična Lilit*), the first lesbian activist group, had in mind when they were looking for a collective coming out and a "socialization of homosexuals" in Yugoslavia:

> [A] new era will begin for a certain subculture in Slovenia; the participants of this subculture, who mostly do not know anything about each other, are generally called homosexuals. […] The anonymity of most Slovenian homosexuals is the best evidence that something which is pushed to the margins of this culture, actually always lives at its center; that it subordinates to something which it creates itself. We live in a subculture which is not realized, even though it exists – because among Slovenians, as everywhere, there are many people who live 'at the margins' only at night (Magnus 1984).

By the late 1980s, with a rapidly changing political environment in both Slovenia and Yugoslavia, the realities of queer activists changed and Magnus, like LL, seemed to fade into the background. In 1990, the Slovenian leadership announced its intention to hold a referendum on independence which was soon to be followed by Croatia. For gay and lesbian activists in Ljubljana, this crucial and turbulent moment served to revive some kind of new (queer) activism which had lost its visibility to those discourses on independence and statehood that effectively dominated the Yugoslav public. The queer "revival" eventually led to the forming of a more generalized organization called *Roza klub* in Ljubljana representing both gay and lesbian positions. Its aim was to "revitalize" the explicitly political position of gay and lesbian activism which had existed throughout the 1980s:

> Roza klub is a political association working to prevent and eliminate discrimination based on people's sexual orientation and to promote equality for people before the law, in the workplace, in public life and in everyday life […]. These objectives apply regardless of which political party (or coalition) is in power and do not exclude any political or other opinion that is not opposed to the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Roza klub 1990: 122).

Similarly, following the example of their friends and acquaintances in Ljubljana, activists from Zagreb and Belgrade joined in forming their own queer organizations aimed at the collective coming out and liberation of queer lives throughout the crisis-shaken Yugoslav federation. Zagreb's lesbian group *Lila inicijativa* which emerged in 1989 soon published a flyer in which they stated that "in our city, republic, and state, women who love women are pushed into anonymity and live in isolation, we [therefore] feel the need for unification as an exit from the present silence". (Lila inicijativa 1989). Much later, Lepa Mlađenović remembered how for Belgrade "everything started with a letter" from Ljubljana encouraging the creation of independent activist groups, which was of vital importance for the early gay and lesbian activists in Serbia (Mlađenović 2005, Gočanin 2014: 337). This letter, sent by gay activist and writer Brane Mozetič, is also preserved in Magnus' archive and testifies to continuous solidarities between various LGBTIQ+ communities across the post-Yugoslav space.

The early 1990s, however, represent a different approach to queer politics: Roza klub quickly joined the general Slovenian discourse on independence hoping to achieve equality through a new Slovenian constitution which would include the demands of the country's LGBTIQ+ community.

Both Magnus and LL had already expressed high hopes for the new political climate and thus publicly declared their support for Milan Kučan as early as in 1988:

> "The Lesbian Section and the Magnus Section of ŠKUC-Forum publicly declare that they support the policy of the Chairman of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, comrade Milan Kučan. We hope that the process of democratization of the society of socialist self-management will be completed as soon as possible and that homosexual people will then also be full citizens of this society" (Magnus, LL 1988).

Similarly, queer activists in Croatia were highly enthusiastic about the new political climate and sought for recognition in an independent Croatia. A few years later, however, one of the leading Croatian lesbian activists Andrea Špehar recalled:

> "After the elections of May 1990 […] the political situation for our movement was so bad, so new women did not come to continue the work […]. There were hopes for human rights and pluralism when the new government began. But it soon became clear that homosexuality was still to be invisible" (Špehar 1994: 22).

In the case of activists from Serbia, where the war extended up until 1999, Lepa Mlađenović recalls how a decade of Milošević's regime had created a reality which "has become more male" where the "social conditions don't exist which would permit [women] to name their identity of lesbian or see the political implication of loving women" (Mlađenović 2001: 383–384).

The end of Milošević's Serbia also represented a 'new dawn' which led to radical changes across the entire post-Yugoslav region: the extension of the European Union onto Slovenia and Croatia further differentiated the political realities of LGBTIQ+ communities in the (post-)Yugoslav space. Several referenda on same-sex partnerships were held in Slovenia and Croatia with various results and consequences. Saša Gavrić and Jasmina Čaušević (2020) have provided a comprehensive overview of a LGBT history of the Western Balkans which puts an emphasis on LGBTIQ+ communities and individuals as historical actors in the light of system change, the advancement of human rights, and democratization. Although their publication has been a major contribution to increasing the visibility surrounding LGBTIQ+ issues, their account provides little analytical contribution beyond presenting a factography of democratic progression and illiberal backlash. One of the main problems of this "sexual minority"

approach lies in the simple fact that it underestimates the historical agency of certain marginalized actors. It reduces the question of queer historicity and historiography to an opposition between groups without rights on the one hand – and legally recognized groups on the other. This understanding of human rights as a constant struggle for recognition reduces the complexity of queerness to a simplified question of civil rights and legal theory. In Gavrić and Čaušević, this means that LGBTIQ+ actors are represented as merely recipients ("sexual minorities") of more significant historical developments ("democratization") as if LGBTIQ+ communities had not already created their own (queer) language beyond the vocabulary of human rights. As a result, the overstretched 'minority' framework only considers LGBTIQ+ communities when they are acting according to a reconfigured script of democratization. Outside this narrative, there is little space for queer agency: contradictions within LGBTIQ+ communities, multiple ways of expressing queerness and sexuality, the multiplicity of approaches to queer activism are all flattened out and erased by trying to make LGBTIQ+ communities fit the technical framework of "minority rights". However, as I have tried to demonstrate, the lively discussions in Yugoslavia's 1980s paint an entirely different picture of gays and lesbians who organized formally in activist groups but primarily created emotional spaces for "homosexual socialization" (clubs, parties, galleries etc.). This early queer activism articulated demands towards both Slovenian and Yugoslav authorities by integrating queer politics into Yugoslavia's self-managing socialism.

The paradox which emerges from an overly one-sided reading of queer history through the prisms of "democratization" and "minority rights" is the case of Serbia's current prime minister Ana Brnabić. Although contemporary Serbia provides no regulations on same-sex partnerships, not to mention the adoption of children or surrogacy by same-sex couples, Brnabić is regularly featured in the media not only because of her role as the first female prime minister of Serbia, but also as the first lesbian woman, and the first lesbian whose partner gave birth to a child while she was in office (BBC 2019). Brnabić thus enjoys the privileges of a 'classical' homosexual partnership while her government repeatedly refused to grant basic rights to LGBTIQ+ communities in Serbia. Her case has therefore become the epitome of contradiction: it proves that homosexuality as such does not play a role in political discourses as long as it remains a docile feature. The consequential nature of queerness, aiming at the core of political contradictions, however, causes much more discontent than a simple focus on sexuality.

Queer Repetitions in (Post-)Yugoslav History

In this part, I want to apply the analytical lens of *repetition* to two specific cases in the queer history of (Post-)Yugoslavia. These include 1) homophobia and the media, and 2) queerness and constitutional rights. I have chosen these cases in order to investigate how queer repetitions manifest their historical legacies in contemporary queer politics. These two cases are not referring to events as such, but rather at repetitions of forms and structures like homophobia and constitutional recognition (cf. Karatani). With the exception of LGBTIQ+ communities in Slovenia, the historical legacies of gay and lesbian activists from socialist Yugoslavia are not often explicitly referenced. Yugoslav symbolism (the Yugoslav flag, the red star, or costumes in the style of *pioniri* and *pionirke*) regularly appears in pride parades: In 2006, Zagreb's *Internacionala* Pride even prominently featured a red star as its logo. The reappearance of these symbols represents a good case in order to investigate how (the study of) queer repetitions can contribute to the understanding of LGBTIQ+ communities in (post-)Yugoslav history.

Homophobia and the Media

The organization of Magnus's 1987 festival week in Ljubljana is one of the most prominent examples of conflicts between gay activists and Yugoslav authorities. The media campaign which was waged against Magnus has been studied, among others, by Roman Kuhar (2003) in his analysis of media representation, but also in Sanja Kajinić's analysis of regional queerness in the post-Yugoslav space (Kajinić 2016: 64–65). Magnus, Slovenia's and Yugoslavia's first gay activist group, had initiated a series of festivals starting in 1984, dedicated to the 'socialization of homosexuality', which eventually became a quest for common spaces, public expression, and the articulation of political interests. Although negative press coverage on the issue of (public and explicit) homosexuality had existed before, state authorities were usually not interfering in the activities of gay activists and their newly claimed spaces. In 1984, Bogdan Lešnik, one of the founders of Magnus, explained how gay activists were surprised to find that "tolerance was higher than […] expected" (Marek 1984: 38–39). This changed radically in 1987 when Magnus announced that it would hold the opening of their annual gay festival on the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial on May 25, hence incidentally coinciding with the Day of Youth, one of the most important state holidays in socialist Yugoslavia. As a result, suspecting some kind of provocation by gay activists, a series of newspaper articles attacked and criticized Magnus for their "provocative" and supposedly

"impious" behavior. A hefty exchange took place in the Slovenian daily newspaper "Delo" which published an article, on page two, under the title of a rhetorical question: "Would a gay congress increase the risk of AIDS?" (Dobnikar 1985). By exploiting homophobic prejudice, namely that gay men would uncontrollably spread HIV/AIDS, the newspaper aimed at stirring up emotions and thus mobilizing its readership against the cause of gay and lesbian activists in Slovenia: "the city's Board of Inspection Services [has] warned the Republican Inspectorate that the gathering of this risk group [of homosexuals] from all over Europe would pose a serious risk of spreading AIDS" (Dobnikar 1985, 2). Three days later, on 21 March 1987, Magnus responded with a short but powerful reply under the title of *Dezinformacija* in which they articulated their disapproval of homophobic prejudice clarifying that their festival is indeed not an ominous "congress 'bringing together this risk group from all over Europe'" (Magnus 1987a, 2) but rather a cultural event aimed at those interested in the political situation of gays and lesbians and their activities in the fields of arts and culture. Nataša Velikonja and Tatjana Greif describe this outrage on the part of the authorities as a homophobic media campaign of *vik in krik* (outcry) which was running through all different levels of institutions – from city administrations to republic-level bodies and federal authorities (Velikonja, Greif 2012, 73). The result was that state officials were, without too much involvement, able to intensify the already high pressure under which the organizers of the festival, both as activists and publicly visible gay men, had to work. This strategy ultimately led to the event being canceled and eventually postponed. In 1987, Magnus's festival did not take place as planned, although a small exhibition was opened on 25 May as an AIDS information event in *Galerija ŠKUC* commemorating the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day. Therefore, Magnus's reaction is best described as a strategy of uncovering disinformation – today more commonly referred to as *fake news* – but also it particularly aimed at exposing prejudices which circulated as ready-made assumptions on gay lives and/or HIV/AIDS. Magnus repeatedly mentioned the importance of intervening in public debates about homosexuality in order to expose and counter homophobic attitudes in the public consciousness:

> "This level of organization is needed, especially in the face of contradictory and incomplete information that we receive about the very notion of homosexuality and of the lack of knowledge about the actual nature of this phenomenon" (Magnus 1986, 36).

Another prominent examples of a public intervention in the media with an explicitly homosexual topic is the lesbian special issue of *Pogledi* published in *Mladina*'s issue *Ljubimo ženske* under the title of *Nekaj o ljubezni med ženskami*. This special issue prominently represented a public lesbian coming out but also articulated and solidified a lesbian political position in great detail. It contained statements such as "A lesbian is the rage of all women, concentrated to the point of explosion" (Pogledi 1987: 24) but also demystified common stereotypes on lesbians such as "All lesbians are manly" or "True homosexuality appears only among men" (Pogledi 1987: 27). This strategy becomes even more important if we consider that Brane Mozetič, who acted as one of the main organizers of Magnus's and LL's legacy organization Roza klub, later recalled how regular attacks against homosexuals actually resonated very well across Yugoslav media outlets resulting in a rather homophobic Yugoslav media environment (Novak 1990).

One of the more explicit historical examples for the post-Yugoslav space after 1991 are Slobodan Milošević's homophobic slurs against Janez Drnovšek and Mira Marković's repeated homophobic attacks against political adversaries (Mares 2000). The political climate in the 1990s heavily exploited homophobic prejudices, as is also described in the prominent anti-war magazine "Pacifik" which was published in Belgrade and featured a regular section on homosexual issues called *Homolulu*. The article *Ružičasti žrtveni jarci*, dealing with politicians in Serbia, documented and denounced a hostile atmosphere where homophobic language was omnipresent across the political and intellectual spectrum. The article mentioned Zoran Đinđić, Vojislav Šešelj, Radoš Smiljković, Momo Kapor, Dragoš Kalajić, and Mirko Jović, all of which either used homophobic slurs to discredit their political opponents or even actively disseminated homophobic and racist conspiracy theories whereby Serbia was presumably under occupation by "Indian-Arab-Black hoards which only bring drug addiction and homosexuality" (Liler 1993: 27). These discourses testify to the continuous practice of invalidating queer existence through public homophobic attacks. As in the Magnus case, queer activists from Serbia aimed at uncovering and debunking homophobic jargon, attitudes, and prejudices by concretely intervening into Serbia's media discourses.

The most recent examples of these kinds of attacks include the media coverage on EuroPride which was hosted by Belgrade Pride in September 2022. Despite three earlier rulings by Serbia's Constitutional Court (in 2011, 2013, and 2016), declaring that any prohibition of a peaceful protest in Belgrade would infringe the participants' constitutional right

to freedom of assembly, the Serbian Ministry of Interior decided to ban Belgrade's EuroPride event a few days before it was scheduled (Jovanović 2022). Journalists and activists in various media outlets continued to speculate whether EuroPride would take place as planned or not. At the same time, LGBTIQ+ activists and public figures responded to the attacks by repeatedly intervening in media debates and calling out obsessive homophobic slurs, conspiracy theories, and outright defamation campaigns. Vesna Pešić has described this notorious "retrograde, conservative and profascist" propaganda against the so-called 'gay ideology' which is generally perceived as a "hybrid war against Serbia" while at the same time nurturing an almost fanatic idealization of Putin, Russia, and orthodox iconography (Pešić 2022). It does not come as a surprise that these propagandistic counter-manifestations, called *litije*, included banners with slogans such as "We don't want gay pride nor Western occupation!" (J.T. 2022).

One of the most prominent faces for the case of EuroPride in Belgrade was Marko Mihailović, an LGBTIQ+ activist and one of the main organizers of Belgrade Pride, who repeatedly appeared in print media and TV countering the homophobic statements by (mostly right-wing) politicians and other (more or less notable) figures. Other very prominent members speaking against homophobic attacks include, among others, journalist Milan Nikolić and Ana Petrović from the LGBTIQ+ group for legal and psychological support *Da se zna* who both regularly appeared in media outlets to counteract hateful anti-queer attacks. Their engagement in the media very much resonates with Magnus's efforts of uncovering 'fake news' or disinformation campaigns which continue to be fueled by homophobia and directed against LGBTIQ+ communities. Mijat Lakićević has made the accurate observation that Aleksandar Vučić's attempts at banning EuroPride go much further than what authorities in the socialist context would have dared to do since they had understood "that it is something inappropriate for a democratic society, even if it was a 'people's democracy' as the rule of the communist party is called in Marxist theory" (Lakićević 2022). In the end, the ban was lifted and EuroPride took place as planned.

From Magnus festival to EuroPride, these repetitive homophobic interventions not only show a continuation of anti-queer sentiment across the ideological spectrum (from socialism to cross out "the so-called" 'post-socialism'); this repetition also testifies to the radical strategy of publicly fighting against homophobic, transphobic, and "anti-gender" politics being crucial to queer activism and engagement.

Queerness and Constitutional Rights

The recurring question of legal recognition of homosexuality can equally be analyzed using the lens of repetition. Concerns about constitutional questions of homosexuality have appeared and re-appeared in queer history at many points in time. The quest for constitutional recognition which resonates with Axel Honneth's idea of social conflict as a constant "struggle for recognition" (Honneth 2014: 11), remained an important prerogative for Roza klub in the early 1990s. Similar to the case of Andrea Špehar in Croatia, queer activists were disappointed by the insufficient attention that their demands were receiving in the aftermath of independence. In a broader perspective, the issues of same-sex partnerships as well as child adoption by same-sex couples have been almost exclusively articulated as problems of constitutionality – i.e. whether same-sex couples as such could benefit from the same rights as heterosexual couples. Without getting lost in details on judicial mechanisms, church involvement, and institutional responses, I want to highlight the most important political demands regarding constitutional rights which have resurfaced – sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully – across the past 40 years in Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav space.

The creation of spaces for the "socialization of homosexuals" was without doubt one of the most important issue faced by both gay and lesbian activists in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. Public space was scarce and resources had therefore to be redistributed as efficiently as possible in order to maintain the already fragile structures of queer activism. Lesbian activists were particularly aware of the intersectional mechanisms of double exclusion (by patriarchal mainstream society and by some parts of the feminist movement) and therefore put visibility – "getting to know each other" (LL 1987: 14) – at the forefront of their political program. As Magnus had already tried to convey during their first festival in 1984, gay and lesbian activists "want[ed] to secure their position in society, their right to exist as all normal citizens" (Renar 1984) but they also considered those spaces that they were looking to occupy as places for the "cultivation […] of difference" (Magnus 1985). These practices of collective visibility, networking, and the creation of spaces were aimed at the articulation of specific political interests *vis-à-vis* the Slovenian and Yugoslav institutions (Magnus 1986: 36). As homosexuality was only partly decriminalized in Yugoslavia in 1977, its complete decriminalization remained one of the main activist demands for both Magnus and LL. Consequently, both groups promoted the idea that the Yugoslav federal constitution would need some kind of a non-discrimination clause that explicitly included sexuality as a marker

of distinction. In other words, the Yugoslav constitution had to be queered. As I have demonstrated earlier, one of the main turning points was when state authorities intervened in public discussions through stirring up media discourses on Magnus's festival planning in 1987. The realization that LGBTIQ+ communities would not simply be recognized by socialist state institutions and society was demoralizing but it also ignited Magnus's "explicit political activation" (Velikonja, Greif 2012: 74). As Aldo Ivančić, one of Magnus's main activists, had commented in an interview with Mladina: "The issue [of homosexuality] needs to be politicized since everybody else has made it political" (N.K. 1987: 47). In order to achieve this politicization, the official position of Magnus was to reformulate the problem of complete decriminalization by providing a long-term solution which would effectively make any form of incriminating legislation regarding homosexuality impossible. The activists therefore referred to it as a fundamental question of constitutionality and campaigned for the inclusion of a non-discrimination clause into Yugoslavia's constitution:

> "We propose that Article 33 of the Yugoslav Constitution be expanded to read: 'Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties, irrespective of distinctions of nationality, race, religion, sex, **sexual orientation**, language, education or social status. – All are equal before the law" (Magnus 1987b). [emphasis by author]

To sum up, instead of only limiting their activism to the creation of spaces for socialization (discos, galleries, rooms for organizing), Magnus was also heavily invested in this open-ended project of inscribing the position of queer activism into both Slovenia's and Yugoslavia's constitutions. This extension of rights, which ultimately failed as Yugoslav authorities stubbornly ignored their demands, would have been a primordial move towards putting an end to the incriminating legal remnants of the past. The rearticulation of homosexuality as a constitutionally protected form of expressing one's own sexuality was the result of Magnus's and LL's political engagement as gay and lesbian activists. Not only did this rearticulation of homosexuality as a constitutional right represent a (queer) political position for itself; it also remained a very concrete (formal) demand until the very end of the Yugoslav federation.

The 1990s saw an ambivalent relation towards LGBTIQ+ communities. On the one hand, decriminalization of homosexuality materialized in all remaining post-Yugoslav states (1994 in Serbia and Kosovo, 1996 in North Macedonia and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1998 in

Republika Srpska, 2003 in Brčko District). On the other hand, war and violence had created an environment in which queer activism was almost impossible to sustain. In 1998, Dejan Nebrigić, a prominent Belgrade-based activist and writer, noted:

> "Although homosexuality has been officially decriminalized and is no longer considered an offense, the repeal of this law has not led to any relief for gays and lesbians in real life. The repression against gays and lesbians is felt at every step: from beatings in the street, discrimination in the workplace, to being taken to so-called 'information interviews' with the police" (Nebrigić 1998: 36).

As LGBTIQ+ communities realized that decriminalization was not sufficient, struggles over constitutional recognition continued to play a major role in queer activism across the post-Yugoslav region – well into the 21st century.

The most recent example includes the interference of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia. On 16 June 2022, the Slovenian Constitutional Court "established that the statutory regulation which determines that (i) marriage may only be contracted by two persons of different sex and (ii) same-sex partners living in a formal civil union may not jointly adopt a child is inconsistent with the Constitution" (Acetto 2022: 1). Thus, the government of Slovenia was given six months to change any regulations in contradiction to the decision of the Constitutional Court. This landmark decision effectively overturned the results of a referendum concerning homosexuality in Slovenia which was held in 2015. The referendum concerning legal amendments that would have resulted in full marriage equality for same-sex couples was rejected by 63.5% of voters (Slovenia Times 2015). The latest decision of the Constitutional Court in Slovenia thus solves the question of constitutionality of marriage equality and ultimately fulfills the decade-long requests which queer activists have made in Slovenia. Nevertheless, the involvement of the Constitutional Court also begs the questions as to what kind of environment these discourses have created for societal acceptance of LGBTIQ+ communities, and painfully emphasizes the fact that legal recognition does not equal societal recognition as such.

In 2013, the public in Croatia had witnessed a similar scenario where a referendum on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage resulted in the adoption of exactly the opposite demand: instead of integrating some kind of constitutional regulation on same-sex partnerships, 65.75% of voters

decided to inscribe heterosexual marriage as a union between man and woman into the constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Zebić 2013). Like in Slovenia, this decision was presented before the Constitutional Court of Croatia which upheld the introduction of such a clause into Croatia's constitution (Ustavni sud RH 2013).

Activists in Serbia made the introduction of a regulation on same-sex partnerships one of the key political demands of Belgrade Pride (Katunac 2021). Such a law would finally regulate the unclear status of same-sex relationships including questions of inheritance, property rights, and medical care (Insajder 2022). However, as the Serbian constitution regards marriage as a heterosexual union between man and woman, like in Croatia, this kind of activism does not directly tackle the constitution but rather seeks to accommodate its position in an anti-queer environment.

This repetition of struggles for constitutional recognition has been most prominently explained by referring to the concepts of *retraditionalization* or *repatriarchialization* which either designate the process by which religious institutions have "implemented a number of conservative spirit actions" (Galić 2018: 214) in previously secularized environments, or as "an authoritarian neoliberal response to a wider crisis of social reproduction, connecting nationalism, patriarchy, the heteronormative family, and religion" (Stubbs, Lendvai–Bainton 2019: 542). However, taking into account the analytical use of repetition, I would argue differently: the give-and-take of constitutional rights, which has often been explained as being an integral part of the process of *repatriarchialization* in the aftermath of Yugoslavia's dissolution, reflects the idea that (at least some) manifestations of heteronormative, patriarchal values had effectively been eliminated (or overcome) by Yugoslav socialism. Therefore, the nationalist and hyper-conservative politics of the 1990s had to actively reintroduce patriarchal values into these 'post-socialist' societies. Queering the history of (Post-)Yugoslavia means taking into consideration the situation of LGBTIQ+ communities but also looking at queer activists fighting against patriarchal structures. Therefore, I would rather problematize the concept of *repatriarchialization* insofar as Yugoslavia's self-management socialism had never really overcome patriarchal values and structures (especially in more rural areas), which continuously manifested itself in party structures, the dynamics of mass organizations, and unresolved issues of gender inequality. Instead of focusing on the process of *repatriarchialization* which implies a simple return to a previous status quo, I would argue that – in the case of queer history – it is more helpful to ask *why* existing constitutional issues have not been resolved in the newly emerging, independent states,

but that these states have rather intensified discrimination by insisting on the agonizing exclusion of certain parts of the population from participation in societal life. In that sense, those reactionary patriarchal phenomena have not simply turned the clock back but rather fulfilled, i.e. realized, the hyper-conservative potentials of the past in contemporary political institutions. Reactionary patriarchy has therefore become aware of itself at precisely that moment when it understood what particular role it would like to assign to women and non-heterosexuals in an absolutely homogenous nation-state. Nationalist politicians made use of this patriarchal potential to mobilize large parts of society into crafting prescribed gender roles with according sexual roles (Bracewell 2000). Their agenda of crafting a constitution which would homogenize the nation-state was more powerful than demands for resolving existing constitutional issues including problems faced by the people in either of these states. The mobilization of patriarchal positions in constitutional texts remains a long-term problem for queer activists which continue to challenge these norms and partake in the inscription of their own lives into these fundamental texts of the nation-state.

Conclusion: Naprej v srednji vek!

In 2014, the official slogan of Ljubljana Pride was *Naprej v srednji vek* ("Forward into the Middle Ages") which was understood as a sign of frustration over the decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia to hold a referendum on the Family Code (Ljubljana Pride 2012). The slogan takes its strength in conveying a queer message through a paradoxical move: "Forward into the Middle Ages" sounds absurd because it means to move forwards into an bygone past. It is precisely this meaning of repetition, the movement towards an actualized past, that exemplifies the analytical usefulness of repetition. In this particular case, "Forward into the Middle Ages" does not denote a return to an idealized past, nor does it mean to move towards a worse future, but rather, it designates a situation which will actualize real-life consequences of conservative potentials from the past. Therefore, it encapsulates the meaning of repetition which is not a question of period or era but rather of the consequences that these particular politics of the (figurative) "Middle Ages" (e.g. abortion ban, primacy of religious arguments over personal choice, sacrosanctity of heterosexual marriage) have on contemporary politics. The organizers of Ljubljana Pride themselves make this allusion to the meaning of repetition for queer activism:

> "[A] past in which illegitimate children were lawless, civil unions unrecognized, gays and lesbians forcibly treated in psychiatric hospitals, abortion outlawed, and contraception inadmissible is never so far away that it cannot be repeated in the future" (Ljubljana Pride 2012).

By looking back to the various temporalities and spaces of queer activism, we can uncover precisely those moments which lead us to either ever more patriarchal situations (*Naprej v srednji vek*); or, we could get inspired by those practices carrying a progressive potential which remains to be actualized in (and through) contemporary queer politics. For historical research, at least, I would argue that using this lens of repetition for queer history brings about a liberating approach that transpierces linear narratives of LGBTIQ+ democratization. The script of "minority rights" sidelines queer agency, as queer everyday experience and action, in favor of a purely technical understanding of history. Repetition has the potential of bringing back the relevance of queer politics to historiography which then, finally again, becomes a place of thinking about one's own (queer) place in time.

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Summary

The histories of LGBTIQ+ communities often heavily rely on historiographies of democratization and teleologies of progress. As a result, LGBTIQ+ communities seem to have become agents solely in the light of regime change while their socialist pasts have been more difficult to access. Instead of searching for a starting point of LGBTIQ+ activism in (Post-)Yugoslavia, this essay tries to reconnect multiple points in time where LGBTIQ+ actors staged protest and sought for liberation. Through the lens of repetition, I want to revisit the discourses and trajectories of LGBTIQ+ activism in Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav space. By looking into various configurations of queer activism – from "homosexual socialization" in socialism through EuroPride in 2022 – I want to provide an analytical framework within which the radical potential of queerness can be uncovered beyond ready-made categories of transitional democracies or minority protection rights.

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