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“THE STRENGTH OF SOCIALISM IS IN DIVERSITY!”: MIKHAIL GORBACHEV’S VISIT TO YUGOSLAVIA (MARCH 14 – 18, 1988)

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This article describes the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March 1988. Gorbachev spent five days in Yugoslavia, during which he visited three of its socialist republics. The introductory chapters provide an overview of the history of Soviet-Yugoslav relations, with a special focus on the period immediately preceding the visit, as well as a brief description of Gorbachev’s reforms and the international political situation of that period. The historical context of the visit and its various aspects and representations in the Soviet and Yugoslav press are analysed in the following chapters, with a detailed itinerary also being included. Special attention is given to various speeches by both the Soviet and Yugoslav functionaries, especially Gorbachev’s speech in the Assembly of the SFRY as well as the Soviet-Yugoslav Declaration. Finally, a brief overview of the reactions to the visit and its consequences is presented.

Keywords: Mikhail Gorbachev; Soviet Union; Yugoslavia; communism; international relations

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Introduction

The first half of the 1980s can be described as an era of relative stability in Soviet-Yugoslav relations. The deaths of longtime rulers Josip Broz Tito and Leonid Brezhnev (Brežnev)¹ marked the end of rather long periods of stagnation (known as *zastoj* in Russian and coincidentally also in Croatian and Serbian languages) in both countries, at the same time emphasizing the need to reform their respective political systems.² This anticipated political realignment also represented an opportunity to rethink bilateral relations, not only between the two states, but also between the two communist parties.

The history of Soviet-Yugoslav relations up to that point can be best described as a long and winding road. After the Yugoslav communists had established themselves as loyal (and most radical) Soviet allies in the immediate post-war era, Stalin's attempts at (permanently) pacifying them would lead to Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Soviet *lager*³ in 1948 and consequently both to the ideological transformation of Yugoslav communism and the establishment of a largely independent foreign policy, whose central pillar was the principle of non-alignment.⁴ Stalin's death (in 1953) and subsequent introduction of the policy of *peaceful coexistence* by Nikita Khrushchev (Hrušev) would lead to a short period of rapprochement that ended abruptly when Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian Revolution three years later. The lasting legacy of this incomplete reconciliation were two declarations: the first was signed in Belgrade in 1955, and the second in Moscow a year later. The Belgrade and Moscow Declarations confirmed Yugoslav sovereignty and inde-

¹ Russian names and terms were romanized according to the ISO 9:1995 transliteration system, with the exception of those cases where established English variants exist (the most notable example being Михаил Горбачев/Горбачёв – *Mikhail Gorbachev* – *Mihail Gorbačev/ Gorbačev*). In such situations, both variants were given when first mentioned. Also, for the sake of simplicity, the Russian versions of their names were used for those Soviet officials who were not ethnic Russians.

² Cf. Sergej Romanenko, "Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem – SSSR i SFRJ u periodu 1985.-1991.," in *Slovenska pot iz enopartijskega v demokratični sistem*, ed. Aleš Gabrič (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012), 35.

³ This Russian word, roughly corresponding to the English word *camp* and its various meanings, was used to describe both the grouping of (primarily) European communist parties and the countries ruled by them.

⁴ Despite being somewhat outdated, the standard work on the Tito-Stalin conflict is still Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1988). For further information on Yugoslav foreign policy in the Cold War era see Tvrtko Jakovina, *Američki komunistički saveznik: Hrvati, Titova Jugoslavija i Sjedinjene Američke Države 1945.-1955.* (Zagreb: Profil – Srednja Europa, 2003); idem, *Treća strana Hladnog rata* (Zaprešić: Fraktura, 2011).

pendence, while importantly leaving the question of whether there was more than one legitimate *way to socialism* unanswered.⁵

After a very dynamic first decade, Soviet-Yugoslav relations gradually entered a phase of stabilization, marked by Yugoslavia's increasing distancing not only from the Soviet Union but also from other Eastern Bloc countries. While Yugoslavia would never become a member of the Warsaw Pact, choosing a policy of balancing between the blocs, it did sign an agreement on cooperation with the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) in 1964.⁶ Intertwined processes of stabilization and distancing were also visible on the Soviet side, where criticism of perceived Yugoslav *revisionism* went out of fashion after the fall of Khrushchev (also in 1964), meaning that attitudes towards Yugoslavia had mostly ceased being a matter of national politics.⁷ While the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia caused yet another crisis in 1968, relations between the two communist countries were perceived as developing in a positive direction.⁸

The long rule of Leonid Brezhnev, as mentioned previously, was characterized primarily by his conservative and rigid interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, which also extended to relations with other Eastern Bloc countries, as exemplified by his suppression of the Prague Spring. This model of foreign policy, which justified military intervention as a means of combating perceived threats to communist rule, not entirely unlike liberal interventionism, became known as the *Brezhnev Doctrine*.⁹ At the same time, Yugoslavia was also going through a period of political and economic stagnation, exacerbated by Tito's decision to subdue the reformist movements in Croatia and Serbia during the early 1970s and prioritize decentralization over liberalization (as evident from the example of the new 1974 constitution), meaning that Yugo-

⁵ On the Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement and its demise, see Svetozar Rajak, *Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the Early Cold War: Reconciliation, Comradeship, Confrontation, 1953-1957* (Oxford - New York: Routledge, 2011). The following period of Soviet-Yugoslav relations is described in Đoko Tripković, *Jugoslavija-SSSR 1956-1971* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2013).

⁶ This arrangement is often imprecisely described as the establishment of associate member status. Cf. Momir N. Ninković, "Establishment of Cooperation Between [sic!] the SFRY and the COMECON in 1964," *Tokovi istorije* no. 3 (2020): 139-163.

⁷ Sergej Romanenko, "'Perestrojka' i/ili 'samoupravljenčeskij socializm'?" M. S. Gorbačev i sud'ba Ūgoslavii," *Slavânskij al'manah* 2006 (2007): 181.

⁸ Elena Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki. Vizit M. S. Gorbačeva v Ūgoslavii v marte 1988 goda," *Novaâ i novejšaâ istoriâ*, no. 5 (2019): 13, <https://dx.doi.org/10.31857/S013038640006348-0> (pagination is cited according to the web version, which differs from the printed one).

⁹ Cf. Wolfgang Mueller, "The End of the USSR," in *The End of Empires*, eds. Michael Gehler et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), 649.

slav communism, described by state propaganda as unique and autonomous, was actually starting to increasingly follow the Soviet statist model.¹⁰

The deaths of Tito (in 1980) and Brezhnev (in 1982) naturally led to a search for appropriate successors. While the Yugoslav communists decided to replace their deceased leader with two collective presidencies, one for the state and one for the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) Central Committee, their Soviet counterparts continued to adhere to a system in which the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was the *de facto* political leader of the state. After a short three-year period during which the Soviet Union was ruled first by Yuri Andropov (Jurij Andropov) and then by Konstantin Chernenko (Černenko), in 1985 the new leader became Mikhail Gorbachev, who soon launched an ambitious campaign of reforms. In 1988, he travelled to Yugoslavia for an official state visit, culminating with the signing of a new declaration on Soviet-Yugoslav relations, the first since the Belgrade and Moscow ones more than 30 years earlier.

Despite its significance and mentions in virtually all of the works covering Soviet-Yugoslav relations in the 1980s, Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia has so far not been the subject of a separate article in English-language historiography (nor the ones in Croatian and Serbian). Valuable articles on the topic were written by Russian scholars Andrei Edemsky (Andrej Edemskij) and Elena Guskova (Gus'kova), the former giving a detailed account of the visit, focused mostly on the events preceding it,¹¹ and the latter giving a broad overview of the bilateral relations between two countries, set against the backdrop of the Yugoslav crisis.¹² Slovenian historians Gorazd Bajc and Janez Osojnik, on the other hand, focused on the Slovenian stage of the visit, also including an overview of Western (American, British, and Italian) reactions and representations along with an analysis of the Soviet-Yugoslav declaration.¹³ The common characteristic of the described articles is the absence of a comprehensive analysis of various aspects of the visit, as well as the relative scarcity of references to contemporary periodicals and (both published and unpublished) primary sources of Soviet and Yugoslav provenance. This article will therefore try offering a systematic overview of the visit, its historical circumstances, and its representations in both Soviet and Yugoslav media.

¹⁰ Romanenko, "Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem," 38.

¹¹ Andrej Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva v Ūgoslaviu v marte 1988 goda," in *Slobodan Milošević: Put ka vlasti / Slobodan Milošević: Road to Power*, ed. Momčilo Pavlović et al. (Belgrade – Stirling: Institut za savremenu istoriju – Centar za proučavanje evropskog susedstva Univerziteta Stirling, 2008), 229-255.

¹² Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki."

¹³ Gorazd Bajc and Janez Osojnik, "Obisk Mihaila Gorbačova v Jugoslaviji marca 1988 in jugoslovansko-sovjetska deklaracija," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* LX, no. 3 (2020): 253-276.

Gorbachev's reforms and Yugoslavia

Ever since the Tito-Stalin split, and especially since the introduction of socialist self-management and the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement, Soviet strategic thinking had been pondering the response to a perceived challenge posed by the Yugoslav alternative *way to socialism*, not only to the Soviet political system but also to Soviet authority among the satellite states in the Eastern Bloc (with the weakest link in the 1980s undoubtedly being Ceaușescu's Romania). According to political scientist Mark Cichock, the Soviet foreign policy establishment had three main options for engaging the Yugoslav challenge: the first was to try limiting the Yugoslav influence through a policy of containment; the second was to try influencing the Yugoslav foreign policy course and directing it in a more pro-Soviet direction (this strategy had been all but abandoned by the time of Gorbachev's rise to power); and the last option was to, noting the limitations inherent to the Yugoslav model, create a policy of rapprochement and try offering its own model as an alternative.¹⁴ While it could be said that Yugoslav anti-reformism in the late 1970s and 1980s was in many ways reminiscent of Brezhnev's approach, it was not until the appearance of Gorbachev that the Soviet model would become seen by the Yugoslav side as a viable alternative. In fact, for some time before that, attitudes towards Yugoslavia played a role in the conflicts between reformist and conservative factions (with many members of the former showing some sympathies for self-management) in the CPSU.¹⁵

Gorbachev's campaign of reforms, unprecedented in both scale and scope, became known as *Perestroika* (from the Russian word *perestrojka*, roughly translated as *restructuring*). What started as a small-scale package of measures aimed at economic restructuring (including the legalization of small businesses) became, most likely at least partially without intent, at first gradually and then suddenly, a full-scale restructuring of the Soviet political system. Gorbachev assumed control not only of the CPSU (finalized at the 27th Party Congress in 1986, where hardliners and conservatives were removed from the party leadership) but also of the public discourse, winning popular support both at home and abroad with his explicit renunciation of political violence.¹⁶ According to leading Yugoslav Sovietologist Sava Živanov, the greatest success of Gorbachev's rule lay in the fact that he managed to restore political stability after the turmoil of the post-Brezhnev era while simulta-

¹⁴ Mark A. Cichock, "The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1980s: A Relationship in Flux," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 1 (1990): 55.

¹⁵ Romanenko, "Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem," 37.

¹⁶ Mueller, "The End of the USSR," 638-643.

neously pursuing a reformist program, in spite of significant resistance from conservative circles.¹⁷

Another key aspect of Gorbachev's reforms was also a result of coincidence. The 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and its unsuccessful cover-up provided an opportunity to loosen governmental censorship and promote a culture of dialogue and openness. The new concept of *Glasnost* (the Russian word *glasnost* can be translated as *transparency*) quickly became a synonym for the ever-increasing freedom of expression, manifested, *inter alia*, in the release of imprisoned dissidents, the publication of previously forbidden books (often the works of those dissidents), and the abandonment of the practice of jamming Western radio frequencies. The ever-expanding freedom of speech also brought to light the numerous crimes against humanity and other human rights abuses committed (and then covered up) during the seven decades of communist rule, triggering a sort of limited-scale *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, focused primarily on the state terror and repression of the Stalin era.¹⁸ Film director Tengiz Abuladze, best known for his film *Repentance*, whose release was delayed due to the perceived critique of the communist regime, described perestroika in a conversation with journalist and writer Slavenka Drakulić as de-Stalinization, re-intellectualization, and finally as a "gradual approach to the healthy meaning of life."¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, it didn't take long for foreign observers to start disseminating these newly introduced political terms/ideologies. As Serbian writer Jovan Ćirilov noted, Gorbachev "introduced two Russian words into world terminology: perestroika and glasnost".²⁰

Another new term introduced by Gorbachev, far less prominent but equally important from the perspective of Soviet-Yugoslav relations, was *new thinking* (*novoe myšlenie*). It was used to describe a new foreign policy doctrine formed between 1985 and 1988, whose main characteristic was deideologization. Moving away from the typical Marxist view of international relations as a zero-sum game, driven by class struggle and winnable only through revolution, Gorbachev turned instead to promoting collective security and perceived universal values of humanism, infusing some views of the realist and liberal schools of international relations into Soviet foreign policy, most importantly the support for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and its *Helsinki Final Act*. There were two main reasons for this change of course. First, the costs of the escalating (nuclear) arms race with the United States, at the time led by anti-communist hawk Ronald Reagan, proved

¹⁷ "Prestrojavanje u Sovjetskom Savezu," *Međunarodna politika*, March 1, 1987.

¹⁸ Mueller, "The End of the USSR," 643-644.

¹⁹ "Perestrojka kao pokajanje," *Danas*, February 9, 1988.

²⁰ "Gorbačov," *NIN*, March 20, 1988.

exhausting for the already frail Soviet economy. Second, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979, whose initial goal was the stabilization of a recently established communist regime, turned into a decade-long war that, unlike the arms race, crippled not only the economy but also the morale of Soviet citizens, many of whom were forced to serve and/or lost their family members and relatives because of the conflict. The new approach to foreign policy allowed Gorbachev to try negotiating an acceptable exit from both of these situations without losing prestige.²¹

Despite the thousands of kilometres separating them, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia had one thing in common – both were communist countries and members of the Non-Aligned Movement, raising fears (chiefly among Western observers) that the Soviets would take advantage of Tito's terminal illness and invade the leaderless country. These fears were proven unfounded, and instead of sending tanks Brezhnev brought flowers and personally attended Tito's funeral.²² This act of friendship was reciprocated by the Yugoslav side three times in the following five years (Yugoslav delegations attended the funerals of Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko in 1982, 1984, and 1985, respectively).²³ The presence of a Yugoslav delegation, led by CPY President Ali Šukrija and state President Veselin Đuranović,²⁴ at the funeral of Chernenko in March 1985 was met with the approval of his successor, who was on that occasion also invited to visit Yugoslavia for the first time. An indicator of Gorbachev's aspirations to improve bilateral relations was his praise of the Yugoslav partisans at the commemoration of the Soviet Victory Day in the same year, which was interpreted by the Yugoslav side as an abandonment of the previous practice of belittling their military contributions.²⁵

With the funeral diplomacy subsiding due to simple biological reasons, two countries continued their rapprochement through bilateral talks on the

²¹ Mueller, "The End of the USSR," 647. For a concise overview of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its international context, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 299-330.

²² On this episode, cf. Tvrtko Jakovina, "Sovjetska intervencija u Afganistanu 1979. i Titova smrt," *Historijski zbornik* 60 (2007): 295-320.

²³ Romanenko, "'Perestrojka' i/ili 'samoupravljenčeskij socializm'?" 182.

²⁴ The positions of both CPY President (President of the Presidency of the Central Committee) and state President (President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia) were alternated each year among the representatives of Yugoslav republics and autonomous provinces in the respective presidencies.

²⁵ Croatia (HR) – Croatian State Archives, Zagreb (HDA) – Record Group 1220 – Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Hrvatske (CK SKH), Box 23, "Informacija o jugoslovensko-sovjetskim odnosima," 1-3.

highest level. In July of 1985, Yugoslav prime minister (president of the Federal Executive Council) Milka Planinc visited Moscow for her first meeting with the new Soviet leader, who somewhat surprisingly quickly accepted to visit Yugoslavia.²⁶ Due to various reasons, almost three years would pass before Gorbachev made his first step on Yugoslav soil, during which numerous meetings between Soviet and Yugoslav representatives were held.²⁷

Towards Gorbachev's visit

Perhaps the most visible effect of Perestroika in Yugoslavia was the change in the perception of the Soviet Union and its political system in the Yugoslav public. The erstwhile odious enemy was slowly becoming a role model.²⁸ More than that, as time passed, Yugoslav journalists and other opinion makers were starting to get the impression that, after a long period of a reverse situation, it was the Soviet Union that was progressing, while Yugoslavia was stagnating.²⁹ The impact of Glasnost was also noted – an analysis of the Soviet press by Branko Vlahović, the Moscow correspondent of Zagreb-based newspaper *Vjesnik*, pointed out the fact that, while the increased coverage of topics related to Yugoslavia and the overall positive tone were obviously influenced by the Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement, the existence of rather critical opinions was the definitive proof that freedom of speech is alive and well in the USSR.³⁰ The reception of reforms by Yugoslav diplomats was more muted; one analysis noted that, while Gorbachev did manage to secure a stable majority in the Politburo, the changes were resisted by some members of "the state and party apparatus, primarily at the middle level, in order to preserve their privileges," meaning that Perestroika's perspectives were still uncertain.³¹ Representations of the political situation in Yugoslavia in the Soviet press, on the other hand, would remain restrained even after Gorbachev's visit, revealing a sceptical view of Yugoslavia's perspectives. The leading weekly newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (*Arguments and Facts*), for example, only informed the

²⁶ Raif Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije: Svjedočenja* (Sarajevo: Oko, 1999), 172.

²⁷ For a list of Soviet-Yugoslav bilateral meetings between 1944 and 1987, see "Jugoslovensko-sovjetski odnosi – kronologija svih susreta," *Međunarodna politika*, March 16, 1988.

²⁸ Sergej Romanenko, *Među "proletarskim internacionalizmom" i "slavjanskim bratstvom": Rossijsko-južoslavskie otnošenija v kontekste etnopolitičkih konfliktov v Srednjoj Evropi (načalo XX veka – 1991 god)* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011), 742.

²⁹ Cf. "Očekujući Gorbačova," *Danas*, February 9, 1988.

³⁰ "Glasnost utječe i na istinu o nama," *Vjesnik*, March 11, 1988.

³¹ HR-HDA – 2058 – Republički komitet za odnose s inozemstvom (RKOI), Box 183, "Podsetnik o unutrašnjem razvoju u Sovjetskom Savezu," 3-4.

readers that “[D]uring the construction of socialism in Yugoslavia, the characteristic forms of political and economic organization of society took shape”, before describing non-alignment, bilateral relations, and the Yugoslav trade surplus.³²

The negotiations on Gorbachev’s upcoming visit were held behind closed doors. Appropriately, bilateral talks started with the meetings of foreign ministers. In January of 1986, Eduard Shevardnadze (Èduard Ševardnadze) hosted his Yugoslav counterpart Raif Dizdarević. In a detailed report, Dizdarević informed the Federal Executive Council of the signing of a three-year cultural cooperation plan, with further talks proposed regarding economic and military cooperation. While the Soviet failure to mention the Belgrade and Moscow Declarations was interpreted as an intentional slight, the decision to inform the Yugoslav side about the changes planned for the 27th Congress and the somewhat unexpected Soviet support for the peace initiatives of the Non-Aligned Movement (without the usual talk of a “natural alliance”, meant to sway the organization, especially its communist members, to the Soviet side in the Cold War) were perceived as gestures of goodwill. Dizdarević also noted that the main Soviet concern was still the arms race and the upcoming negotiations with the US, which Yugoslavia strongly supported, ending his report with the conclusion that the scope of changes in the USSR was still negligible, with the upcoming congress being an opportunity to disrupt the *status quo*.³³ More than a decade later, Dizdarević would describe Shevardnadze as a pleasant interlocutor and the polar opposite of his rigid predecessor Andrei (Andrej) Gromyko, noting that he was the first Soviet foreign minister who was not an ethnic Russian.³⁴

On the eve of then CPY President Milanko Renovica’s visit to the USSR in December of 1986, a group of diplomats from the Socialist Republic (SR) of Croatia had a meeting with leading Ukrainian politician Valentyna Shevchenko (Valentina Ševčenko),³⁵ who stated that, due to various obligations and issues in the USSR, it would be very difficult to organize Gorbachev’s proposed visit to Yugoslavia during the following year.³⁶ However, when Renovica finally met Gorbachev the same month in Moscow and presented him the official

³² “SSSR-SFRÛ: stabil’nye otnošeniâ,” *Argumenty i fakty*, March 19-25, 1988.

³³ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, “Izveštaj o poseti saveznog sekretara za inostrane poslove R. Dizdarevića Sovjetskom Savezu, od 8. do 12. januara 1986.”

³⁴ Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije*, 176.

³⁵ In Soviet-Yugoslav bilateral relations, along with usual sister city arrangements, there were also unofficial sister republics, with the Serbian counterpart being Russia, Croatian Ukraine and Slovenian Belarus and/or Georgia.

³⁶ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, “Iz razgovora sa zamenikom predsednika Prezidijuma Vrhovnog sovjeta SSSR Valentinom Ševčenko,” 1-2.

proposal, it was "accepted with gratitude."³⁷ On that occasion, according to a Yugoslav report on the visit, Gorbachev complained about the treatment of the Soviet Union in the Yugoslav press, which, in his opinion, was diametrically opposed to the treatment of Yugoslavia by the Soviet journalists. Certain tensions arose during the expert talks on economic cooperation, which led to the Soviet leader promising to play the role of mediator in the future. Soviet wishes for a new declaration on bilateral relations that would be a successor to the Belgrade and Moscow Declarations caused the Yugoslav side to fear the possibility of establishing an ever-closer connection, which from their perspective meant the danger of integration into the Eastern Bloc.³⁸

In June of 1987, Shevardnadze arrived in Belgrade for a brief visit, with Dizdarević playing the role of host this time. It was already evident from the announcement of Shevardnadze's visit, which described it as one of "several high-level visits from the USSR to the SFRY" planned for the following months, that arranging plans for Gorbachev's visit would be among its main topics.³⁹ Indeed, two foreign ministers agreed that two new official documents needed to be adopted, one dealing with economic issues, primarily the trade imbalance (*Long-term program of economic cooperation*),⁴⁰ and the second, more important, being the aforementioned declaration on bilateral relations. Dizdarević also expressed hope that negotiations at the highest level would be continued in Yugoslavia, especially in light of the approaching anniversary of the start of the Tito-Stalin conflict.⁴¹

There are different opinions about the reasons for the numerous postponements of Gorbachev's visit. According to Gorbachev's close associate, Vadim Medvedev, the main cause of delays was the lengthy work on the preparation of official documents. This claim is disputed by historian Andrei Edemsky, who claims that relations with Yugoslavia simply weren't very important from the perspective of Soviet reform processes, which is why the issue was

³⁷ "Sovmestnoe kommúnike o vizite v SSSR delegacii SKŪ," *Pravda*, December 13, 1986.

³⁸ HR-HDA – 1220 – CK SKH, Box 23, "Informacija o poseti delegacije SKJ na čelu s predsednikom Predsedništva CK SKJ Milankom Renovicom Sovjetskom Savezu, od 9. do 12. decembra 1986. godine," 5-8.

³⁹ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, "Savarnadze [sic!] – posjeta."

⁴⁰ The work on this document was already in progress at the time of Shevardnadze's visit, with the first draft being completed no later than December 1986. Cf. HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, "Dugoročni program ekonomske saradnje između Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije i Saveza Sovjetskih Socijalističkih Republika za period do 2000. godine [Primljeno: 22. XII. 1986.]."

⁴¹ Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije*, 177-178; Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbacheva," 231-232.

on the back burner for a while.⁴² This view is partially shared by his compatriot, Elena Guskova, who also notes the influence of the unstable political situation in Yugoslavia.⁴³ On the other hand, Shevardnadze's deputy Anatoly Adamishin (Anatolij Adamišin) spoke about Renovica-Gorbachev and Shevardnadze-Dizdarević meetings in an interview on the process of global (nuclear) disarmament, meaning that from the Soviet perspective, Yugoslavia did have a role in those processes.⁴⁴

In any case, Gorbachev was definitely well acquainted with Yugoslav problems, which were blamed on malign Western influences and clandestine right-wing forces by Soviet analysts.⁴⁵ There are also claims that the responsibility for the delays was on the Yugoslav side and was tied to the events occurring in the USSR.⁴⁶ Indeed, apart from the liberalization of small-scale entrepreneurship, the year 1987 in Soviet history was also marked by ethnonational tensions in Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) and among Crimean Tatars.⁴⁷ Another visit of a Soviet functionary to Yugoslavia that was constantly being postponed was the one by the increasingly independent head of Moscow communists, Boris Yeltsin (El'cin), to his Belgrade colleagues, most likely because his actions were threatening to break the monopoly of the CPSU Central Committee on foreign policy.⁴⁸

The economic aspects of Soviet-Yugoslav relations, although not entirely ignored, have also not been the subject of much research interest, even though they were usually mentioned as a matter of high importance both publicly and at various bilateral meetings. The Soviet Union was Yugoslavia's leading trade partner, and Yugoslavia was its eighth. Yugoslav imports from the USSR included oil and other energy sources along with raw materials for the chemical industry (around 90% of all imports), while exports included ships, machines and machine parts, clothing, and food. The described situation was causing a trade surplus on the Yugoslav side (more than 1.3 billion dollars at the time of Gorbachev's visit, primarily due to the drop in oil prices), which the two countries tried balancing through clearing agreements, which were unpopu-

⁴² Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva," 233-234.

⁴³ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 19.

⁴⁴ "Novo mišljenje u službi sveobuhvatne bezbednosti," *Međunarodna politika*, December 16, 1987.

⁴⁵ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 27.

⁴⁶ Tvrtko Jakovina, *Budimir Lončar: Od Preka do vrha svijeta* (Zaprešić: Fraktura, 2023), 432.

⁴⁷ Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva," 235.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

lar because they provided ample opportunities for corruptive practices.⁴⁹ Additionally, with the value of the Yugoslav dinar suffering due to inflation and the increase in imports being undesirable because of fears that it would lead to an increase in foreign debt (and thus hard currency leaving the country), the share of Yugoslav trade and general economic interactions with Western Europe had been constantly decreasing.⁵⁰

As a result of the described situation, Yugoslavia was, as the 1980s passed, slowly getting more and more dependent (to a greater degree than Eastern Bloc members Hungary or Poland) on trade with the USSR and other Com-econ countries, with Gorbachev's reforms representing an opportunity for a renegotiation of economic relations between the two countries.⁵¹ In 1986, the USSR accounted for roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of all Yugoslav exports and $\frac{1}{6}$ of all imports.⁵² While the mentioned drop in oil prices did lead, among other factors, to a predicted drop in trade exchange,⁵³ it was relatively small (from 5.9 billion dollars in 1986 to 5.7 billion in 1987).⁵⁴ Despite the existence of an extensive network of economic activities connecting SFRY and USSR (total trade exchange between 1982 and 1987 was around 35 billion dollars), it was, according to leading Croatian diplomat Ivica Trnokop, reduced to simple trade arrangements, without any "higher forms of cooperation".⁵⁵ However, as with most other Yugoslav interactions with the Soviets, there were also constant fears among Yugoslav officials that economic cooperation would eventually lead to a return to the Soviet camp.⁵⁶ Gorbachev's visit was thus seen as an opportunity to finally create a new and durable economic arrangement.

Finally, in the second half of 1987, favourable circumstances began to form for the realization of Gorbachev's visit. According to historian Robert

⁴⁹ "Kako trgujemo," *Vjesnik*, March 12, 1988; "Prvi test "novog mišljenja"," *Vjesnik*, March 12, 1988; "Vjetrometina s istoka," *Danas*, March 8, 1988. For an insight on the complex process of coordinating the import of Soviet oil to a federal communist state cf. HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, "Uvoz nafte i plina iz SSSR-a."

⁵⁰ Cichock, "The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1980s," 67. For further information on Yugoslav foreign trade, see *ibid.*, 67-71.

⁵¹ "Vjetrometina s istoka."

⁵² HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, "Informacija o odnosima SFR Jugoslavija – SSSR i učesće SR Hrvatske," 2.

⁵³ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 183, "Informacija o bilateralnoj suradnji SFR Jugoslavije i SSSR-a i učesću SR Hrvatske", 3-4.

⁵⁴ "Kako trgujemo."

⁵⁵ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 185, "Savezni sekretarijat za vanjske poslove II. uprava [16. 12. 1987.]," 2. Trnokop held the position of the president of SR Croatia's Republic Committee for Foreign Relations.

⁵⁶ Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije*, 172; Jakovina, *Budimir Lončar*, 433.

Service, the Soviet leader's two main policy goals for 1988 were the preservation of the stability of communist regimes and the strengthening of economic cooperation through the Comecon,⁵⁷ with the development of closer relations with Yugoslavia fitting into both stated goals. At the level of international diplomacy, the focus was on two neuralgic points – arms control and the War in Afghanistan. Gorbachev tried solving the first problem through negotiations with American President Ronald Reagan. In the course of two summits, the first in Washington in December 1987 and the second in Moscow in May-June 1988, certain success was achieved – an entire category of nuclear weapons (so-called intermediate-range missiles) was banned and mutual trust was established (with Reagan publicly abandoning the *Evil Empire* narrative), while the final agreement on the limitation of strategic (nuclear) arms was postponed until the arrival of a new presidential administration in the United States.⁵⁸ On the other hand, it should be added that the Soviet support for disarmament (and denuclearization in general) was always partially based on the assumption that periods of *détente* (*razrjadka* in Russian) represented an opportunity, as Gorbachev described to Renovica at their 1986 meeting, for the peace-loving socialists to present themselves to the world as a viable alternative to aggressive and warmongering Western “imperialists.”⁵⁹

At the same time, the USSR and USA also played an important role as guarantors in the signing of Geneva Agreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan in April 1988, which did little to end the military conflict but enabled the Soviets to withdraw their troops the following year.⁶⁰ Such peace initiatives were supported by the Yugoslav side, with Gorbachev being perceived as sincere in supporting non-alignment and Yugoslav independence, despite the ever-present fears of being returned to the Soviet camp.⁶¹ It should be noted, however, that by the time of Gorbachev's visit, this possibility was already considered unrealistic, not only by Soviet and Yugoslav observers but also by Western analysts. A declassified CIA intelligence assessment from December 1987, for example, claimed that while “[T]he current expansion of Yugoslav-Soviet relations almost certainly will create an atmosphere that encourages both sides to consider more frequently the wishes and sensitivities of

⁵⁷ Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War: 1985-1991* (London: Macmillan, 2015), 324-325.

⁵⁸ William Taubman, “Gorbachev and Reagan / Bush 41,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 4 (2018): 556-557.

⁵⁹ HR-HDA – 1220 – CK SKH, Box 23, “Informacija o poseti delegacije SKJ na čelu s predsjednikom Predsedništva CK SKJ Milankom Renovicom Sovjetskom Savezu, od 9. do 12. decembra 1986. godine,” 12.

⁶⁰ Odd Arne Westad. *The Cold War: A Global History* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), 549-550.

⁶¹ Cf. Jakovina, *Budimir Lončar*, 433.

the other," the historical experiences suggested "that Moscow will have only limited success in turning broader ties into a lever than can be applied to gain specific policy objectives."⁶²

In order to further ingratiate themselves to Gorbachev, apart from the renewed participation in various events celebrating the October Revolution,⁶³ Yugoslav officials also invited his spouse Raisa (for whom a special program was planned) to accompany her husband and organized several opportunities for "spontaneous" conversations with Yugoslav citizens. There are even claims that the decision to organize the final part of the visit at the seaside, in Dubrovnik, was meant to further attract the attention of the Soviet leader.⁶⁴ After the visit had been announced at the beginning of December 1987 for the end of the month or January of the following year (only to be postponed once again),⁶⁵ work began on its plan. On that occasion, the aforementioned Trnokop stated that Soviet-Yugoslav relations "are based on the established principles contained in the Belgrade and Moscow Declarations and are constantly enriched with the new content of mutual interest."⁶⁶ According to the visit plan, the two main topics for discussion were "bilateral relations" and "international situation".⁶⁷ After the topics of discussion and program aspects were agreed upon and other necessary activities were completed, everything was ready for Gorbachev's arrival in Yugoslavia. The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs adjusted the date according to his meetings with Reagan, finally settling on March 1988 in January of the same year.⁶⁸

Gorbachev in Yugoslavia

On March 14, 1988, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, arrived in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for an "official friendship visit" at the invitation of the Presidency of the SFRY and the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Com-

⁶² *Yugoslavia-USSR: Can Gorbachev Lure Belgrade Back? An Intelligence Assessment*, 12. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08S01350R000300910001-4.pdf>

⁶³ Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva," 233.

⁶⁴ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 20.

⁶⁵ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 185, "Posjeta Gorbačova SFRJ."

⁶⁶ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 185, „Savezni sekretarijat za vanjske poslove II. uprava [16. 12. 1987.],” 1.

⁶⁷ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

munists of Yugoslavia.⁶⁹ Gorbachev's entourage included the aforementioned Vadim Medvedev, along with Ivan Sila(y)ev and Georgy Shakhnazarov (Georgij Šahnazarov).⁷⁰ The Soviet leader stayed in Yugoslavia for a little less than five days, during which he visited three cities – Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Dubrovnik – in three Yugoslav republics – SR Serbia, SR Slovenia, and SR Croatia, respectively. Finally, in the afternoon of March 18, he returned to the USSR.

It was Gorbachev's longest official stay abroad since he took over the leadership of the Soviet Union, and it was also the first time that the General Secretary of the CPSU gave a speech in the Assembly of the SFRY.⁷¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that the visit attracted significant interest among both the domestic and foreign public, which is why it was covered by more than 200 journalists and 16 foreign TV stations.⁷² Announced by both the Soviet and the Yugoslav press on March 1,⁷³ the visit would remain the subject of extensive media attention (not just in the involved countries but also in the West) for several weeks. As a sort of prelude to the visit, a presentation of the Serbian translations of Gorbachev's two books on Perestroika was held in Belgrade, along with an accompanying book exhibition, unsurprisingly receiving a warm reception.⁷⁴ The commentary in the Soviet press was also overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing the renewed ties of friendship. For example, according to the report on the meeting between Shevardnadze and Yugoslav ambassador in the USSR Milan Vereš on the eve of the visit, it took place in a "warm and friendly atmosphere".⁷⁵ In their articles, "special correspondents" of leading Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* (*Izvestiâ*) allegorically connected Gorbachev's arrival with the beginning of spring.⁷⁶ After a brief overview of the history of Belgrade with an emphasis on the Second World War, the possibilities of applying Perestroika in Yugoslavia were described, and the

⁶⁹ "Ot'ezd iz Moskvy", in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ CK KPSS M. S. Gorbačeva v Socialističeskû Federativnuû Respubliku Ūgoslaviû* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo političeskoj literatury, 1988), 3.

⁷⁰ "Pribytie v Belgrad," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 4.

⁷¹ "Korak u 21. stoljeće," *Danas*, March 22, 1988.

⁷² "Gorbačov danas u Beogradu," *Vjesnik*, March 14, 1988.

⁷³ Cf. "Gorbačov dolazi sredinom marta," *Borba*, March 1, 1988; "Ob oficial'nom družestvennom vizite M. S. Gorbačeva v Socialističeskû Federativnuû Respubliku Ūgoslaviû," *Izvestiâ*, March 1, 1988.

⁷⁴ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 26; "Glavnaâ tema – Perestrojka," *Pravda*, December 13, 1986; "Izdany v Ūgoslavii," *Izvestiâ*, March 12, 1988.

⁷⁵ "Priem posla," *Izvestiâ*, March 5, 1988.

⁷⁶ "Belgrad: nakanune," *Pravda*, March 14, 1988; "Belgrad vstrečacet vysokogo gostâ," *Izvestiâ*, March 14, 1988.

belief that the people of Belgrade would welcome guests with "true Slavic hospitality" was expressed.⁷⁷

Gorbachev spent the first three days of his visit in Belgrade, where he carried out all of the most important activities (such as the presentation of the Soviet-Yugoslav Declaration), while the rest of his stay was more "like a flash visit."⁷⁸ The importance of the decision to include other cities (and republics) along with the capital lies in the fact that it represented a tacit but direct endorsement of Yugoslav federalism, especially since Slovenia and Croatia, as has already been mentioned, were semi-official counterparts to Belarus (sometimes also Georgia) and Ukraine, respectively. The two Soviet republics also had their own seats in the United Nations General Assembly and the constitutional right to secede (along with all the other Soviet republics), which were the privileges withheld from their Yugoslav sister republics.⁷⁹ Ljubljana and Dubrovnik were described in the Soviet press as "[T]wo peaceful cities under the peaceful sky," and the latter as "the pearl of the Adriatic."⁸⁰ Gorbachev was also impressed by the beauty and cultural heritage of Dubrovnik, a place where, according to him, "every stone breathes history,"⁸¹ imploring the public "to protect Dubrovnik."⁸² A little more than three years later, while the historic core of the city was being destroyed by the Yugoslav People's Army, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman reminded Gorbachev of these words in a letter asking him for help in advancing the peace process.⁸³

Alongside the meetings with Yugoslav political representatives (both at the federal and republic levels) and other standard diplomatic practices (such as the exchange of gifts and wreath-laying ceremonies), the itinerary of the visit also included socializing with Yugoslav citizens on the city streets and the tours of two factories (Ivo Lola Ribar Institute in Belgrade and Iskra in Ljubljana) and the Maize Research Institute on the outskirts of the Yugoslav capital. Gorbachev's contacts with ordinary citizens were mostly described in the press as very cordial, often in violation of the official protocol,⁸⁴ while expressions of dissatisfaction were recorded in the Slovenian press, among other

⁷⁷ "Belgrad vstrečaet vysokogo gostâ."

⁷⁸ Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva," 253.

⁷⁹ Cf. "Dvigat'sâ vpered po vsem napravleniâm," *Pravda*, March 18, 1988.

⁸⁰ "Budušemu – mirnoe nebo," *Izvestiâ*, March 18, 1988.

⁸¹ "Reč' M. S. Gorbačeva," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 69.

⁸² "Dubrovnik treba sačuvati," *Borba*, March 19-20, 1988.

⁸³ Goran Mladineo, ed., *Tuđmanov arhiv: Korespondencija predsjednika Republike Hrvatske dr. Franje Tuđmana od 1990. do 1999. godine*, vol. 1: *Godine stvaranja i obrane: 1990. i 1991.* (Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naknada – Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2015), 470.

⁸⁴ Cf. "Korak u 21. stoljeće."

things, because of the traffic jams caused by the Soviet leader's arrival.⁸⁵ Gorbachev's wife, Raisa, accompanied her husband for ceremonial parts of the visit, while during the negotiations a special program was organized for her, dedicated to the presentation of the cultural heritage of the host country.⁸⁶ Her charismatic appearance and demeanour, somewhat reminiscent of the style of American first ladies, attracted a lot of attention and prompted comparisons with late Tito's wife, Jovanka.⁸⁷

Another important aspect of Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia was that he finally met Slobodan Milošević,⁸⁸ a rising politician whom (as it turned out ignorant) Western observers sometimes called the *Balkan Gorbachev*, erroneously perceiving him as a reformist.⁸⁹ Despite the fact that Gorbachev only spoke with Milošević as a part of his official lunch with the leadership of SR Serbia (which is why the whole event was given relatively little attention in the press),⁹⁰ the future events would make their first contact the focus of some interest. The official version of Milošević's toast, published in the contemporary press, repeated typical communist talking points, such as the claim that "socialism is the embodiment of the progressive forces of the modern world".⁹¹ The full version, published in his book *Godine raspleta* (*The Years of Unraveling*) a year later, paints a somewhat different picture, mentioning, for example, "the counterrevolution in Kosovo",⁹² which is why it was perceived by Soviet observers as supporting the recentralization of Yugoslavia.⁹³ Gorbachev's toast, on the other hand, included a rather bizarre claim "that in the heart of every Russian and Serb, so to speak, in their genetic memory, there is mutual goodwill and friendly closeness."⁹⁴ Unsurprisingly, due to such (some would say borderline eugenic) statements, many "Serbs felt that a friend and an older

⁸⁵ Bajc-Osojnik, "Obisk Mihaila Gorbačova," 268.

⁸⁶ Cf. "Raisa u galeriji," *Vjesnik*, March 19, 1988; "Znakomstvo s Belgradom," *Izvestiâ*, March 15, 1988.

⁸⁷ "Šarm – tajno oružje," *Danas*, March 22, 1988.

⁸⁸ Romanenko, "'Perestrojka' i/ili 'samoupravlenčeskij socializm'?" 185.

⁸⁹ Josip Glaurdić, *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2011), 23.

⁹⁰ Cf. "Na osnove polnogo ravnopraviâ, samostoâtel'nosti, vzaimnogo uvaženiâ," *Pravda*, March 17, 1988.

⁹¹ "Oficial'nyj obed v čest' M. S. Gorbačeva ot imeni Prezidiuma Socialističeskoj Respubliki Serbii i Prezidiuma CK SK Serbii," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 54.

⁹² Slobodan Milošević, *Godine raspleta* (Belgrade: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1989), 199.

⁹³ Cf. Edemskij, "O vizite Mihaila Gorbačeva," 251-252. Edemsky is the first historian to notice the difference between the two versions of Milošević's toast.

⁹⁴ "Vystuplenie M. S. Gorbačeva," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 55.

brother had reappeared,"⁹⁵ adding to the perception among some historians that Gorbachev (erroneously) saw Milošević as a like-minded ally, mostly to the detriment of his own rule.⁹⁶

During his stay in Yugoslavia, Gorbachev gave several speeches of varying lengths to different audiences, from factory workers to political leaders, often repeating and/or modifying certain messages and claims. However, the two central events of the visit were his speech in the Assembly of the SFRY and the presentation of the Soviet-Yugoslav Declaration. Instead of describing individual speeches and events, this article analyses the main messages and conclusions of the entire visit and also provides a detailed itinerary, which was absent in previous works dealing with this topic.

The itinerary for Gorbachev's visit⁹⁷

Monday, March 14

Flight from Moscow to Belgrade, arrival around 1 PM, welcome at the airport

Meeting in the Belgrade White Palace (*Beli dvor*) with Lazar Mojsov (President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia) and Boško Krunić (President of the Presidency of the LCY Central Committee)

Afternoon visit to the Avala mountain, paying tribute at the Monument to the Unknown Hero and the Monument to Soviet War Veterans

Motorcade to the Memorial Cemetery and then to the Palace of the Federation of SFRY

Tuesday, March 15

Visit to the House of Flowers

Visit to the Park of Friendship and the tree planting ceremony

Continuation of negotiations at the LCY Central Committee

Visit to the Ivo Lola Ribar factory

Presentation of the Declaration and signing of the long-term program of economic cooperation in the Palace of the Federation

⁹⁵ Gus'kova, "Serbiâ ždala podderžki," 70.

⁹⁶ Cf. Romanenko, "Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem," 43.

⁹⁷ For further information on specific events, see the respective parts of *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*.

Wednesday, March 16

Awarding of the Memorial Golden Medal of Belgrade

Visit to the Assembly of the SFRY, speech, and exchange of gifts

Meeting with the leadership of SR Serbia – Petar Gračanin (President of the Presidency) and Slobodan Milošević (President of the League of Communists of Serbia)

Socializing with the citizens of Belgrade

Visit to the Maize Research Institute in Zemun Polje

Flight to Ljubljana

Thursday, March 17

Visit to the Iskra factory

Socializing with the citizens of Ljubljana

Meeting with the leadership of SR Slovenia – France Popit (President of the Presidency) and Milan Kučan (President of the League of Communists of Slovenia)

Flight to Dubrovnik

Meeting with the leadership of SR Croatia – Ante Marković (President of the Presidency), Stanko Stojčević (President of the League of Communists of Croatia), and Antun Milović (President of the Executive Council)

Friday, March 18

Farewell meeting with Mojsov and Krunić

A walk through Dubrovnik

Departure to Moscow

Messages and conclusions

As has already been stated, Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia was publicly presented, starting from the official announcement, as dedicated primarily to bilateral and international relations. Despite the constant emphasis on the importance of the economy, which the Soviet leader described (along with culture) as the "cement for the construction of international relations,"⁹⁸ and

⁹⁸ "Reč' M. S. Gorbačeva," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 32.

the fact that the signing of the long-term program of economic cooperation was a part of the same ceremony as the presentation of the Declaration,⁹⁹ economic issues were not given a prominent place in the discussions, being entrusted to various experts instead. The talks between Soviet and Yugoslav representatives were described by the participants as friendly and sincere, often deviating from the protocol, which was certainly helped by the fact that the content of the Declaration was prepared in advance and the political leaders only confirmed it, thus avoiding potential disputes.¹⁰⁰ As a rule, Gorbachev had the main say, both in conversations behind closed doors and in public appearances, while Yugoslav representatives contradicted him mostly in those situations when it seemed that his statements could be perceived as supporting further integration of Yugoslavia into the Eastern Bloc.

Discussions on bilateral relations touched upon both the past and the future. According to Gorbachev's opinion, the SFRY and the USSR, as multinational communist federations, were natural allies, so instead of having fruitless arguments about the past, it was much better to draw certain lessons from it, stating that "[I]t's never too late to learn."¹⁰¹ According to Soviet journalists, after the rupture caused by the Tito-Stalin split, it was "the inexorable desire of two peoples to restore lost mutual understanding" that led to a rapprochement based on the declarations of 1955 and 1956, a process in which Josip Broz Tito had the most important role.¹⁰² Gorbachev somewhat indirectly attributed the blame for the conflict to Stalin,¹⁰³ which he later explicitly admitted in his memoirs, stating that "it was important to clear away the debris of the past by admitting our often grievous mistakes."¹⁰⁴ While some Yugoslav observers would later interpret Gorbachev's statements on Tito as the Yugoslav leader's posthumous triumph,¹⁰⁵ their primary function was the Soviet leader's (re)positioning inside the domestic political system. During his visit to Tito's mausoleum (the so-called *House of Flowers*), Gorbachev stated "that the visit to the memorial was not dictated by mere curiosity, but above all by my party duty," describing Tito in the visitor book as a "participant of the

⁹⁹ "Prinâtie i podpisanie sovjetsko-ûgoslavskih dokumentov," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 22-23. The full name of the document is *Long-term Program of Economic Cooperation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for the Period up to 2000*. The signatories were Ivan Sila(y)ev and Janez Zemljarič for the Soviet and Yugoslav sides, respectively (cf. *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 86-92).

¹⁰⁰ "Perestrojka između Moskve i Beograda," *NIN*, March 20, 1988.

¹⁰¹ "Vstreči M. S. Gorbačeva na ûgoslavskoj zemle," *Izvestiâ*, March 16, 1988.

¹⁰² "Radušie serbskoj zemli," *Izvestiâ*, March 15, 1988.

¹⁰³ Cf. "Sovetsko-ûgoslavskie peregovory v Palate federacii," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 481.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije*, 182-183.

Great October events,” thus including him in the Pantheon of both Soviet and international communism. This claim is additionally strengthened by the fact that the first exhibitions of the Tito Memorial Centre outside of Yugoslavia were “not by chance” held in Moscow and Minsk.¹⁰⁶

Historical reminiscences were not an end in themselves, but had a direct role in shaping future policies. At the very beginning of the visit, President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia Lazar Mojsov described the Belgrade and Moscow declarations as “an unchanging base, on the foundation of which we have been moving forward.”¹⁰⁷ After Gorbachev stated that the Soviets “are ready to go as far in the development of relations with Yugoslavia as the SFRY leadership wants,” Mojsov replied that the SFRY adheres to an approach “based on known principles.” The Soviet leader then conciliatorily concluded that no one has a “monopoly on the truth” and that the SFRY and the USSR are connected by “the common heritage of our teachers, the classics of Marxism - Leninism - scientific socialism.”¹⁰⁸ This exchange pretty much sums up the positions held by representatives of the two countries and communist parties, which were further developed in the Declaration. A little earlier, in a conversation with journalists, Gorbachev also stated that national tensions are not a Soviet or Yugoslav specificity and, in any case, do not represent a direct threat to socialism.¹⁰⁹ The opening of the Yugoslav cultural centre in Moscow and the simplified recognition of university diplomas were also agreed upon.¹¹⁰

Consensus was reached much easier on the issues of international politics. Representatives of both sides announced their support for the end of the arms race, with Gorbachev simultaneously criticizing parts of the Western political and intellectual establishment, whose role he described as malicious, and calling for a *perestrojka* of international relations. Soviet and Yugoslav foreign policy views were described as very close or even identical.¹¹¹ An important Soviet concession concerned the role of the Non-Aligned Movement, which was designated as a leading force in the peace movement, with particular emphasis on its support for disarmament (the reduction of nuclear, chemical, and conventional weapons). Gorbachev also supported the further development of mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes.¹¹² President of the Assembly of the SFRY Marjan Rožič took advantage of the opportunity and

¹⁰⁶ “Posešenje Memorial'nogo centra Iosipa Broz Tito,” in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ “Sovetsko-ûgoslavskie peregovory v Palate federacii,” in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ “Otvety M. S. Gorbačeva na voprosy žurnalistov,” in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 7-8.

¹¹⁰ “Više i bolje,” *Borba*, March 17, 1988.

¹¹¹ “Sovetsko-ûgoslavskie peregovory v Palate federacii,” in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 10-11.

¹¹² “Reč' M. S. Gorbačeva,” in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 30-32.

described Tito, based on a peculiar interpretation of his speech at the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade (1961), as the originator of the policy of disarmament.¹¹³ The issue of the war in Afghanistan was hardly mentioned, partly because even before the visit, Yugoslavia expressed its support for the peace negotiations in Geneva.¹¹⁴

Gorbachev's speech in the Assembly of the SFRY undoubtedly represented the grand finale of the visit, even though it belongs to its middle part from a chronological point of view. The Soviet leader first recalled the Soviet-Yugoslav "wartime brotherhood" and the "unfounded accusations" against Tito, before moving on to the topic of Perestroika, which he believed was necessary, both in regard to relations between communist parties and in economic policies. He described Perestroika as a simultaneously modernizing and traditional (with the mandatory tribute to Lenin) reformist campaign in the Soviet Union that offers certain lessons for the whole world. He spoke optimistically about the disarmament process (but with scepticism about the role of NATO), supported the demilitarization of the Mediterranean as a contribution to the stabilization of the Middle East and (sub-Saharan) Africa, and announced the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although Gorbachev emphasized the leading role of the communist party, he also announced the continuation of the process of separating the state and the party, noting that the democratization of society and international relations is the role of the entire nation, not just the diplomats.¹¹⁵ In his most powerful (and often quoted) statement, Gorbachev not only repudiated the Brezhnev Doctrine but also implored other communist countries and parties to base their relations on different foundations: "The strength of socialism is in diversity, in the wealth of international experience."¹¹⁶

In a later analysis of the visit, Yugoslav officials would claim that the part of Gorbachev's speech devoted to the need for the transformation of international relations, apart from the political conflicts in the Soviet Union at the time (primarily the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh province), was also inspired by the "multinational character of Yugoslavia and its concept of full national equality."¹¹⁷ Other observers have noticed that Western Europe, China, Germany, and Latin America were not

¹¹³ "Privetstvennoe slovo M. Rožiča," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 36-37.

¹¹⁴ Cf. "Očekujemo sadržajan dijalog za vreme posete Gorbačova," *Politika*, March 4, 1988.

¹¹⁵ For the integral version of Gorbachev's speech, see "Vystuplenie M. S. Gorbačeva," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 38-53.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁷ HR – State Archives, Slavonski Brod (DASB) – Record Group 0276 – Općinska konferencija Saveza komunista Hrvatske Slavonski Brod (OKSKH Slavonski Brod), "Informacija o poseti generalnog sekretara CK KPSS M. Gorbačova Jugoslaviji (14. do 18. mart 1988.)," 6.

mentioned in the speech at all, while harsher criticism of the United States was also avoided.¹¹⁸

The presentation of the Soviet-Yugoslav Declaration was the second main event of the visit. The signatories were two parties (CPSU and LCY) and two states (USSR and SFRY), and it consisted of three points, with the first and third points applying to the countries and the second one to the parties. The first point encouraged the strengthening of political, economic (through the long-term program), and cultural cooperation between the two countries, “starting from the unconditional respect for the particularities of the paths and forms of their socialist development and different international positions.” The second point included support for the further development of socialist self-management and the process of dealing with the past, while rejecting the idea of the existence of a “monopoly on truth,” while the third point referred to the mechanisms for peaceful coexistence (and the activities of UN and CSCE), the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and the political and economic equality of countries.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, there was no ceremonial signing of the declaration (and there are no signatories apart from the aforementioned political institutions), and it does not mention Marxism or Marxism-Leninism at all (primarily to avoid different interpretations of these terms and consequent accusations of revisionism),¹²⁰ along with any mention of Slavic solidarity.¹²¹

Echoes and consequences

According to Russian historian Sergei (Sergej) Romanenko, Gorbachev’s visit to Yugoslavia in March of 1988 represented the complete “political and ideological reconciliation between the CPSU and the LCY, the USSR and the SFRY.”¹²² Contemporary commentary by Ranko Petković, the leading Yugoslav expert on international relations, seems to confirm this claim. He noted that the visit exceeded expectations and surprisingly satisfied all the interested parties: Yugoslavia preserved its independence, the USSR and Gorbachev were recognized as reformists, the West (primarily the US) was pleased by the proclaimed adherence to international principles and both the Non-Aligned Movement and the Eastern Bloc countries had no reasons to complain.¹²³ Sim-

¹¹⁸ Jakovina, *Budimir Lončar*, 436.

¹¹⁹ “Jugoslovensko-sovjetska deklaracija,” *Međunarodna politika*, April 1, 1988.

¹²⁰ “Svakom svoja perestrojka,” *NIN*, March 27, 1988.

¹²¹ Romanenko, *Među “proletarskim internacionalizmom” i “slavjanskim bratstvom”*, 746.

¹²² Idem, “Višenacionalna država i/ili višestranački sistem,” 39-40.

¹²³ “Jugoslavija i Sovjetski Savez,” *Međunarodna politika*, April 16, 1988.

ilar views were also held by State Department analysts, who concluded that the visit "inaugurates a new era in [Soviet-Yugoslav] bilateral ties", with yet unclear future perspectives, however in any case the "impact on Western security interests will probably be only marginal."¹²⁴

Even sceptics like the Slovenian political scientist Anton Bebler had to admit that there had been a "psychological shift in the Soviet leadership," which led him to the conclusion that Yugoslavia was at the time not threatened by Soviet influence.¹²⁵ The Yugoslav fear of returning to the camp was also unfounded because, as Croatian journalist Željko Brihta astutely observed, the camp actually no longer existed. The perceived threat to communism existed "the least from the outside and mostly from within, from itself."¹²⁶ An example of a more critical attitude towards the results of the visit were the views of the most famous Yugoslav dissident, Milovan Đilas, who in an interview for the *Encounter* magazine¹²⁷ pointed out that the nominal recognition of state sovereignty in the 1955 Belgrade Declaration did not prevent Khrushchev from suppressing the Hungarian Revolution a year later, as well as the fact that the perceived Yugoslav prosperity (compared to the USSR), contrary to Yugoslav state propaganda, was not the result of the superiority of socialist self-management over Soviet planning-based system, but of greater reliance on Western free-market economies, which meant "repudiating socialism in fact, if not in language."¹²⁸

It seems that the reception of the visit was also very warm among ordinary citizens. One public opinion survey in Slovenia, for example, showed that as many as 51.7% of respondents considered Gorbachev the most positive foreign politician, while Reagan finished in second place with 28%.¹²⁹ A positive atmosphere prevailed in the Soviet press as well. Branko Vlahović, the previously mentioned Moscow correspondent of *Vjesnik*, observed in the sample of two Moscow newspapers that in the short period before, during, and after the visit, more positive articles on Yugoslavia were published than in the past 10

¹²⁴ Melissa Jane Taylor, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988*, vol. 10: *Eastern Europe* (Washington: United State Government Printing Office, 2023), 735. For a more detailed analysis see *ibid.*, 736-741.

¹²⁵ Anton Bebler, "Sovjetsko "novo razmišljanje" i sigurnost Jugoslavije," *Politička misao* XXVI, no. 2 (1989): 53.

¹²⁶ "'Lager" je unutra," *Vjesnik*, March 18, 1988.

¹²⁷ A noted publication of the Cold War era anti-communist Left and (in its later years) the neoconservative movement, with ties to the American foreign policy establishment, including the intelligence services.

¹²⁸ "Djilas on Gorbachov," *Encounter*, September-October, 1988.

¹²⁹ Bebler, "Sovjetsko "novo razmišljanje" i sigurnost Jugoslavije," 51.

years.¹³⁰ Bearing in mind the fact that almost all articles and reports, not only in the Soviet and Yugoslav but also in the foreign press, were very affirmative, it is not surprising that Yugoslav analysts concluded that such reactions were, *inter alia*, an expression of the recognition of “Yugoslav politics and its contribution to new positive developments in international relations.”¹³¹

The political leaders of the two countries and their respective communist parties also expressed their satisfaction with the visit and its results. The Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, at its session on May 24, 1988, assessed the visit as the most important in the history of Soviet-Yugoslav relations,¹³² while on the cover of the official newspaper of the CPSU *Pravda*, it was described as a “celebration of the policy of peace and cooperation.”¹³³ There was also strong satisfaction on the Yugoslav side, especially due to the fact that the talks were conducted “between absolutely equal partners,”¹³⁴ so it is not surprising that the Presidency of the SFRY spoke affirmatively about the visit, with special emphasis on the Declaration.¹³⁵ Krunic even invited Gorbachev to spend his annual vacation at the Yugoslav seaside, to which the Soviet side returned the invitation, but didn’t offer a concrete answer.¹³⁶ In a report by the Federal Secretariat for Foreign Affairs from December 1988, it was stated that Soviet-Yugoslav relations “for a long period of time have been marked by evident growth and stability.” It was also noted, however, that the problem of the Yugoslav trade surplus (more than 1.7 billion dollars) had not yet been solved.¹³⁷ In another report by the same institution a little more than a year later, it was stated that “[I]n the relations between Yugoslavia and the USSR during the past year, significant progress has been achieved,” with the importance of Gorbachev’s visit and the Soviet-Yugoslav Declaration also being emphasized.¹³⁸

¹³⁰ “Ugled velike države,” *Vjesnik*, March 24, 1988.

¹³¹ HR – DASB – 0276 – OKSKH Slavonski Brod, “Informacija o poseti generalnog sekretara CK KPSS M. Gorbačova Jugoslaviji (14. do 18. mart 1988.)”, 9.

¹³² “V Politburo CK KPSS,” *Izvestiâ*, March 25, 1988.

¹³³ “Dobrye plody,” *Pravda*, March 26, 1988.

¹³⁴ “Proverenim putem,” *Politika*, March 19, 1988.

¹³⁵ “Puno uzajamno uvažavanje,” *Politika*, March 24, 1988.

¹³⁶ HR-HDA – 1220 – CK SKH, Box 23, “Zabeleška o razgovoru predsednika Predsedništva CK SKJ Boška Krunića sa ambasadorom SSSR u SFRJ Viktorom Maljcevim održanom 7. aprila 1988. godine,” 1-2.

¹³⁷ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 185, “Informacija o aktuelnim procesima u SSSR i njihovom uticaju na razvoj u IEZ i na odnose u lageru – posebno sa aspekta političkih, ekonomskih i vojno-bezbednosnih interesa Jugoslavije, kao i perspektive dalje [sic!] saradnje,” 21.

¹³⁸ HR-HDA – 2058 – RKOI, Box 185, “Odnosi i saradnja SFRJ-SSSR: Aktuelna kretanja u Sovjetskom Savezu,” 1.

Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia and his statements actually, as it turned out later, in many ways anticipated his famous speech in the UN General Assembly on December 8, 1988, in which he announced the end of the policy of interference in the internal affairs of the Eastern Bloc countries, as well as the unilateral withdrawal of Soviet troops stationed there.¹³⁹ The loosening of constraints and obligations in the Eastern Bloc enabled considerable savings and further rapprochement with Western countries, but at the same time, it also enabled the emergence of both anti-reform and anti-communist forces.¹⁴⁰ Although Gorbachev was probably at the height of his power and influence in 1988 (for example, he was the *Time Person of the Year* in both 1987 and 1989), in the same period, the first signs of open criticism of his reform policy began to appear. Somewhat fittingly, the famous polemical article titled *Why I Cannot Forsake My Principles*, written by previously unknown chemist Nina Andre(y)eva, was published in the newspaper *Sovetskaâ Rossiâ* the day before Gorbachev left Moscow. The Soviet leader first read the article, which he would later describe as "a frontal assault on the reform process," on the plane to Belgrade.¹⁴¹

This scandal was an early sign that a period of political crisis had started in the Soviet Union as well. As noted by Romanenko, in both countries, attempts to reform the "militarized system of socialism" eventually led to military coups, while the long-term program eventually became a dead letter.¹⁴² On the Yugoslav side, according to political scientist Josip Glaurdić, "Gorbachev's visit proved to be only a brief respite in the midst of a brewing crisis."¹⁴³ Gorbachev's parting message that the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia would "walk a common path together"¹⁴⁴ indeed came true for the most part, but not in the way the Soviet leader meant it.

¹³⁹ Cf. William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 421-422.

¹⁴⁰ Mueller, "The End of the USSR," 634.

¹⁴¹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 252. Gorbachev got the date of publication right, but not the date when he left Moscow. On the whole affair, see the chapter "Who's afraid of Nina Andreyeva?" in Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 337-375.

¹⁴² Romanenko, *Meždu "proletarskim internacionalizmom" i "slavjanskim bratstvom"*, 758.

¹⁴³ Glaurdić, *The Hour of Europe*, 26.

¹⁴⁴ "Beseda s žurnalistami," in *Vizit general'nogo sekretarâ*, 75.

Conclusion

During the 1980s, both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were undergoing a period of political stagnation and economic crisis. While polemics raged in Yugoslavia between the centralists and the federalists, which slowly turned into ethno-national conflicts, the new Soviet leader, Michael Gorbachev, began an increasingly ambitious reform campaign known as Perestroika. An important aspect of Gorbachev's reforms was the transformation of relations with the members of the Eastern Bloc, i.e., the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which limited their sovereignty and caused the Soviets large expenses.

These circumstances enabled the establishment of closer relations with Yugoslavia, a communist country that was not a member of the Eastern Bloc, and between which and the Soviet Union there had been various tensions for decades. In March of 1988, Gorbachev visited Yugoslavia, staying in the country for five days. In addition to the capital, Belgrade, and SR Serbia, the Soviet leader also visited SR Slovenia and SR Croatia. The central part of the visit was Gorbachev's speech in the Assembly of the SFRY and the adoption of a new declaration on bilateral relations between the two countries and communist parties, the first after more than 30 years. Although it had an extremely positive reception around the world and announced a new phase in Soviet-Yugoslav relations, Gorbachev's visit ultimately did not leave much of a mark due to the collapse of the two countries and regimes.

This article represents an attempt to present a systematic and complete description of the visit in its historical context. Of course, the topic is by no means exhausted by its publication. Further research based on unpublished archival material is needed, as well as a greater focus on economic issues and specific local circumstances.

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