Like Yugoslavia, the European Union may well prove a failure in the long run, unless it can prevent the dominance of its most powerful member states. Hence the continuous need to find ways of embracing difference without giving up the cultural tradition in which one was born and raised.

Why do I write about the literature and the writers of Yugoslavia, a country that no longer exists? Above all because I was born and spent most of my life in that country, it was the site of my happy childhood. But also because writing about its literature helps me to understand the structures and relationships of present-day Europe as well as the forces that effect its destiny, and because the entry of my new homeland of Slovenia into Europe represents the flipside of its departure from Yugoslavia and the Balkans. Finally, because I live in a world in which I am hardly interested, while remaining committed to the lost cause that is my true home.

I write these lines *pro domo sua*, in my own defence. I am a bohemian bourgeois, a reader and a writer by vocation who longs for a world where everything is the way it was before, only different. I live between the old working class neighbourhood of Zelena jama in Ljubljana and several other cities in the Balkans, Europe, and America where I cultivate bonds of family, friendship and profession. I was born on Christmas Day 1961 in a one-room apartment in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, then a republic of Yugoslavia. My parents were two young provincials who left their village in the forests of the Notranjska region in the years after World War II, to search for a better life in the city. Ljubljana, socialist poverty notwithstanding, was the site of my magnificent childhood and youth. I attended the sports high school and then the University of Ljubljana, graduating in 1985 with a degree in comparative literature and philosophy. I shaved my beard and moustache and travelled for the first time to America to undergo a rite of passage on a two-month Greyhound bus journey from the Atlantic to Pacific coast along transcontinental Interstate 80: the proverbial open road. In August 1988, I left for
America again, this time to pursue my post-graduate studies. I travelled there on a Yugoslav passport. I received a PhD in social thought from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs of Syracuse University. I came home again five years later, this time travelling on a Slovenian passport. I returned to my hometown though not to my homeland. My American experience had changed my life no less than the violent disintegration of the land of my birth, Yugoslavia.

For one thing I met my future wife, Erica Johnson, in Brooklyn, at a party thrown for Irwin, a Slovenian visual arts group, a member of which is Andrej Savski, my best friend from primary school. Erica and I married in October 1993. An investment banker turned translator and writer now named Erica Johnson Debeljak, she describes her experience in post-Yugoslav Slovenia in the book Forbidden Bread: A Memoir (2009). We have three children: Klara, 15, Simon, 13, and Lukas, 11. We lived a year in hired apartments in Budapest, San Francisco and Chicago: one foreign city every five years. That was our “five-year plan”. Our home, our permanent residence, is at Zvezna ulica – federation or union street – in Zelena jama in the Moste district of Ljubljana.

But does the name of the street really matter?

It does. In our neighbourhood, there are streets with names such as Proletarian, Partisan, May 1, Factory, and Social streets: here nomen est omen really holds true. Despite the changes of state borders and political and economic systems, our street has kept the name given to it after World War II. The history of the union known as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) is part of my address, part of my permanent residence. There was no doubt about it back then, but the officials of the new Slovenian state had doubts after 1991 when they issued me – as well as all other citizens except the so-called “erased” – new personal documents, including a new birth certificate. Under “country of birth” only three mysterious hyphens remained: Yugoslavia was concealed behind these three dashes of shame.

I, for one, do not feel ashamed. I was born in Yugoslavia and grew up there. It was in Yugoslavia where I was socialized, where I internalized the concentric circles of different cultures and languages, religious traditions and national mythologies, and imbibed political and social ideas as well. Yugoslavia was a political community that was explicitly established as a transnational union of nations or republics. Since 1991, Slovenians live in a unitary and independent state, but one that in 2004 willingly joined yet another supranational union: the European Union.

The European Union is also a political community explicitly established as a transnational union of nation-states and both of these political unions are (or were in the case of Yugoslavia) characterized by democratic deficits. Granted, the member states of the European Union operate in a system of capitalism, while the Yugoslav republics operated in socialism. And, yes, the “personality cult” of Tito that helped define socialist Yugoslavia is unknown in the European Union. (Remind me, please, who is the current president of the European Commission or Council?) And as for capitalism, that is the exploitation of man by man. Its mirror image was socialism where the reverse was true, as the old Cold War joke put it.

I am among the few privileged generations who were born and raised in Yugoslavia. We
were privileged from the standpoint of multiculturalism, which was of course reinforced by the school curriculum though just as much by our personal experience. Our wider homeland stretched from Mount Triglav in Slovenia to the Vardar River in Macedonia, from the Danube to the Alps, from the Adriatic Sea to the Pannonian plains. In Yugoslavia, identity was forged through immediate contact with the culture of one’s own republic and accruing contacts with the ethnicities and cultures of the federal and transnational homeland beyond. I doubt that my younger fellow citizens, socialized in the independent state of Slovenia and the European Union, have managed yet to develop similar ties to united and free Europe, the contemporary wider homeland of Slovenians. This is not surprising. Today “unity in diversity” in the European Union is a no less an elusive concept than “brotherhood and unity” was in the former Yugoslavia. Both ideologies represent a screen onto which nations and individuals project their own desires and expectations. Yugoslavism bit the dust. Europeanism continues to hold out its promise, containing a fragile hope that its far-reaching, inclusive, utopian agenda might appeal to the majority of the citizens and peoples of Europe.

Parallels between Yugoslavia and European Union are easily drawn. Is this a somewhat distasteful comparison? To some it may well be. But let’s bracket the political nature of Tito’s Yugoslavia and compare the Yugoslav and European unions from a cultural standpoint.

Both unions house several Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam) as well as various minority and majority ethnic communities or “nationalities”. They both contain different languages, different scripts, legacies from the ancient Roman and medieval Byzantine empires, the mysticism of Orthodox Christianity and the rationality of western Christianity not to mention the traditions of the Renaissance, humanism, and the Enlightenment. The parallels between the two unions are also noteworthy in regard to their Muslim communities. Muslims in Yugoslavia lived contiguously and in historical continuity in almost all of its republics, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this regard, the sole inglorious exception was Slovenia, as Muslims began arriving in Slovenia to look for work as late as the 1960s, while its Jewish population was expelled in the Middle Ages. Slovenia thus had the dubious reputation of being the most religiously and ethically homogenous of all the Yugoslav republics.

The Balkans, it is said, is a designation for all the lands where subjects of the Ottoman Empire once lived in geographical and historical continuity. Both, Yugoslavia and the European Union, include elements of Balkan cultures, namely traditions that bear the marks that the sultan’s state left behind after its five hundred year rule. After Romania and Bulgaria, the so-called Balkan rhythm and blues section, joined the European orchestra on 1 January 2007, Greece was no longer the only predominantly Orthodox member of the EU. Both of these new members are Orthodox, while Bulgaria brings with it a substantial indigenous Muslim community.

Dual nationality is the legal and political framework within which relations between individual citizens, nations and states within the European Union are regulated. Dual nationality allows the individual to develop ties with his or her nation-state and with wider Europe at the same time. This set-up, in both its structure and practice, is entirely comparable with that of Yugoslavia, where each individual was a citizen of the republic in which he or she had permanent residence, and concurrently a citizen of the federal state.
Tito’s Yugoslavia adopted the idea of dual nationality from the imperial “prison of nations” as critics liked to call the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The empire of Habsburgs collapsed in 1918, leading to the establishment of, among other nations, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929.

Josip Broz Tito, a cunning communist activist, charismatic guerrilla leader, and a populist world statesman, asserted that the second Yugoslavia, the socialist Yugoslavia, was born in May 1945 out of a purifying void, which came after the victory over Fascist and Nazi occupying forces. At that turning point, the entire history of these lands was written off as rotten bourgeois culture. This characterization led to mass extra-judicial killings of the putative representatives of that culture in the massacres that followed the official end. More were killed during this post-war eruption of violence than throughout the long years of war. As for Tito, the new leader was inspired by a range of political styles and strategies, some of which were developed by the Habsburg imperial court. It was, for example, from this treasure trove that the Yugoslav dictator found the props for his so-called Hochstaplerei, a penchant for pomp and ceremony, as well as ideas on how to manage the differences among religious and national communities, while at the same time offering them a relatively peaceful life under a unified political regime. Weakness had to be transformed into a virtue. There were differences of opinion about which methods to apply in pursuit of diversity and unity. What content should be given to the connective ideology that would succeed in transcending religious, linguistic and national cultures without abolishing them? What measures would be suitable to achieve the overarching aim of “many in one”?

The following is an illustrative example of this dilemma. In 1961 the distinguished Serbian writer Dobrica Cosic (1921–), later the principle author and instigator of the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1986) that provided the theoretical foundation for the Serbian national socialism of Slobodan Milosevic, engaged in a polemic with Dusan Pirjevec-Ahac (1921–1977), a Slovenian intellectual and critic, as well as a popular university professor of literature. The polemic took place at a revealing historical moment: 1961 was also the year that the Nobel Prize in literature was awarded to Ivo Andric (1892–1975), a Bosnian Catholic with Croatian upbringing, a permanent residence in Belgrade and a firm believer in the Yugoslav model.

Edvard Kocbek (1904-1981) was a renowned poet, a high-ranking partisan and Christian Socialist, former vice-president of the Slovenian government and a minister in the federal Yugoslav government until he fell out of favour. Kocbek and Pirjevec provided the inspiration and impetus for the foundation of the literary and critical magazine Nova revija, the principal forum for Slovenian anticommunist nationalism during the 1980s. In his polemic with Cosic, Pirjevec argued for the right of a nation to its separate and specific culture and to its political sovereignty – in other words, he was in favour of nationalism. Cosic advocated the abolishment of the individual republics, promoting what he called “integral Yugoslavism”. Pirjevec was among the most articulate opponents of this movement, but he was not the only one who resorted to nationalism to resist Yugoslav federalism, which he perceived as disguised Serbian unitarianism.

Mass nationalist demonstrations in Zagreb, New Left protests in Belgrade and – to a much lesser degree – in Ljubljana in 1971 exposed the limitations of the Yugoslav project. The Habsburgs had managed the nationalist aspirations of the component states of the
Austrian empire through repression and concession. Tito relied on the same methods. He made sure that the communist leaders who supported political reforms were removed from the governments of individual republics. At the same time, the 1974 Yugoslav constitution weakened federal institutions. Only the Yugoslav People’s Army grew in importance as a bulwark of the political regime and state unity, while, on the other hand, republics became practically independent in a number of matters.

But, as we now know, the despotic “carrot and stick” tactics borrowed by the Yugoslav leader from Habsburg predecessors worked only for a while. In the long run, the Yugoslav federal system collapsed. Following Tito’s death in 1980, leading Yugoslav politicians showed a complete lack of imagination reflected in their nonsensical and vapid rallying cry: “After Tito, Tito!” The connective ideology of Yugoslavism began to be supplanted by militant nationalism, more than anywhere else in Serbia. When Slobodan Milosevic, the architect of the Yugoslav catastrophe, articulated his chauvinistic programme of “uniting all Serbs into one Serbian state”, the elites in the other Yugoslav republics were left with few options. Many Slovenians, myself included, considered the nationalist call for our own nation-state as the best of bad options.

Slovenian politicians and people in the late 1980s were not, in fact, carried away by nationalism. We did not actively strive to leave Yugoslavia. A variety of options were put forward that would have allowed Yugoslavia to continue existing as one state: a looser federation, an asymmetric confederation, cantons of the Swiss model, a “commonwealth of nations” based on the British model. All of these proposals wound up in the waste paper basket beneath Milosevic’s office desk. It was only after Serbia’s arrogant rejection of each and every proposal that Slovenian public opinion turned against membership of Yugoslavia. It became clear after Milosevic’s attention-grabbing speech delivered at the celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo at Gazimestan in Kosovo on 28 June 1989, that he regarded post-Tito Yugoslavia as “the continuation of Serbia by other means”. On that fateful day, an unremarkable communist official was transformed into an impassioned, even fanatical, nationalist leader.

The last refuge of a scoundrel

Europeanism as the ideology of solidarity and unity among the different nations and peoples of Europe strives to transcend individual nationalisms. It is a noble goal. However, when it comes to a free and united Europe, my optimism of the will crumbles and the pessimism of my reason prevails. I fear that the European Union, like Yugoslavia, will prove a failure in the long run, unless it finds a way to prevent the dominance and supremacy of its most powerful member states.

In Yugoslavia, it was the largest nation, Serbia, that exerted its dominance over the others. In the European Union, it is core Europe – Kern Europa – that advocated politics of a “two-speed Europe”. Under the mask of economic necessity Kern Europa preserves the old division between the fast, developed West and the slow, underdeveloped East on the European continent. From this perspective, the countries of the so-called western Balkans (Albania and former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia) are running in idle.
Nationalism has been so successful because it is the only grand narrative about membership in a community that has naturalized history. In this narrative, what is in fact shaped by society is perceived as given by nature. This process was put into force after the downfall of the empires ruled by the Romanov, Habsburg, and Ottoman (Osman) dynasties. After 1918, the map of Europe changed entirely. Many new countries appeared which either enjoyed sovereignty for the first time (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) or had restored it within new borders (Hungary, Poland). The ideology of the predominant nation became state ideology. Parts of national communities which ended up inside the newly drawn state borders were given the derogatory designation of “ethnic minorities”, and the new spirit of nationalism presented the members of these communities with two options: either become like the majority or disappear.

Besides Ivo Andric’s 1946 short story “Letter from 1920” (Pismo iz 1920. godine), the most prophetic literary work of the second Yugoslavia is the 1978 collection of essays by Danilo Kis entitled The Anatomy Lesson (Cas anatomije). Already in the 1970s, that is, several decades before the forces of nationalism caused the brutal dismemberment of Yugoslavia, Kis accurately exposed the very substance of nationalistic ideologies:

Fear and envy are an engagement that demands no effort. Hell is comprised of the others (in a nationalist key, of course), and everything that is not mine (Serbian, Croatian, French) is foreign to me. Nationalism is the ideology of banality. Nationalism is thus a totalitarian ideology, while a nationalist […] is a coward who fails to admit his cowardice.

In the post-imperial age, nationalism or “the last refuge of a scoundrel” became an excuse for ethnic cleansing. Riga and Rijeka, Lvov and Ljubljana, Budapest and Bucharest, Vilnius and Warsaw, Zagreb and Prague: before World War I, all of these cities were abuzz with numerous and large ethnic and religious communities. By the end of the twentieth century, the demographic situation was far blander. Diversity had been supplanted by national homogeneity. Indeed, it might be said that European nations have three things in common: conversion to Christianity, the use of organized violence and nationalism.

At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, educated elites in various parts of Europe began to use the nation-state as a model to determine an individual’s membership in a community. Before the revolutions of the eighteenth century, which made the people sovereign, nations in the modern sense of the word did not exist. The nation established a community bound together not by a common monarch or common religious, regional or class affiliation. The nation’s existence became independent of dynastic, economic or military changes: some Slovenians who lived through the twentieth century resided in four different states, without ever having left their village.

In order to go from “a Europe of principalities” into “a Europe of nations”, it was necessary to radically change the mentality and conceptual frames of European people. They had to be convinced that, in addition to their well-known and explicit local identity, they had another national identity. In other words, the nation as an entity was not always as self-evident as it is now. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a fisherman from
what is now the littoral region of Slovenia and a winegrower from what is now the Styrian part of Slovenia would have had about as much in common as a Prussian junker and a Bavarian stockbreeder: very little!

In other words, European man once based his identity on his affiliation to trade or profession, religion, city or region, very often through direct contact. Seen from this point of view, national identity was something quite abstract, but it was precisely this kind of abstract identity that cultural, economic and political elites in individual regions introduced as the basis for gradually establishing common interests.

The formation of Slovenian, German and other national identities required a well-thought-out narrative on common origins and tools for passing these identities on from generation to generation. The elites – specifically those that had an interest in founding a nation-state – made use of compulsory education and military service as well as mass media and literature. Almanacs, calendars, statistical tables, newspapers, magazines, manuals and other books became widely available during the era of industrialization and modernization in the nineteenth century. Gradually they managed to oust the worm’s-eye view. In other words, the idea of an individual’s identity “from below” embedded in one on-one relationships, whether in a city or the countryside, retreated and was replaced by a bird’s-eye view; that is, the idea of an individual’s identity “from above”, where people slowly learned that they are supposed to be members of a wider community, a community that came to be called a nation. Put simply: the narrative about the nation must first and foremost exist in the minds of people before it can possibly unite them on a battlefield or a soccer pitch.

Why is nationalism so seductive? Because it can be neatly and attractively condensed into a straightforward formula, a formula that triggers an emotional reaction by summoning a person to patriotic vigilance and, in the blink of an eye, making him bigger than he is as an individual. The nation’s ideas thus turn quickly into the idea of the Nation. The nation becomes nothing less than a metaphysical idea, which needs to be preserved by all means, including those that are morally reprehensible.

Distinction here is vital. Nothing is gained by contemptuously shoving all forms of nationalism into a night in which all cows become black, if I may paraphrase Hegel. Nationalism, to be exact, has three different meanings. In its first meaning, it is a people’s movement endeavouring to assert its own special group identity. In its second, it is a nation’s endeavouring to attain tools of political sovereignty, i.e. a state. In its third, it stands for ethnic chauvinism. In the name of the metaphysical idea of “German nationality” or “Slovenian nationality”, for example, a rival or opponent becomes an enemy, that is to say, robbed of his humanity. When members of one nation believe they are superior to others, nationalism turns into ethnic chauvinism and becomes unacceptable.

Carl Schurz, a nineteenth-century German revolutionary who migrated to America, fought in the American Civil War, and later became an American politician, hit the nail on the head when he proclaimed: “my country, right or wrong.” Usually understood as a case of nationalist blindness, Schurz’s piece of wisdom must be read in its entirety. It is the next, and virtually always omitted, sentence that makes proper sense of the first: “when right to keep it right, when wrong to set it right.” The complete statement thus
properly calls for the necessary critical attitude towards one’s homeland! Historically, nationalism fought against the institutions of Church and aristocracy and therefore had emancipatory dimensions. Nevertheless, it soon faced a rival: communism. The *Communist Manifesto*, published just as the Spring of Nations begun in 1848, also called for solidarity, though not for a solidarity restricted to the nation-state but rather extended to a global social class. Such solidarity was epitomized in the internationalist slogan: *Workers of the world, unite!*

**The home and the world**

The idea of cosmopolitanism is distinct from that of the competing narratives of nationalism and communism. A cosmopolitan draws meaning from numerous overlapping and contradictory levels of group experience, language and tradition. A cosmopolitan identity is a volatile one, yet it is driven by cognitive curiosity and the moral ability for compassion and empathy. To really understand the other, you have to be able literally to put yourself in his shoes.

A cosmopolitan attitude joins “the home” and “the world”, the two halves that never seem to add up to a whole. A cosmopolitan is a smuggler who continually crosses from domestic to foreign, from national to international, spreading the latter while always questioning the former. A cosmopolitan knows that the *belle époque*’s exclamation “the home and the world” is out of date. After World War I, it was replaced by bullying exclusionism and belligerent nationalism expressed in the ideological maxim “the home or the world”. A contemporary cosmopolitan identity, based on flexibility, resilience, and adaptability, the constant layering of identity, and the widening of circles emerges from the insight that today “the world is the home”.

A cosmopolitan embraces difference without giving up the cultural tradition in which he was born and raised. Such cosmopolitanism is found in the works and life of artists such as Rainer Maria Rilke, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan. I read and admired these writers but it was only when reading Danilo Kis, the Yugoslav writer *par excellence*, that I found the crucial and decisive argument for cosmopolitanism. Reading the writers of what I have termed the Yugoslav Atlantis, I discovered ongoing challenges and momentary flashes of pleasure in polyphony. I searched for books in which “I” is “the other” and in which narratives contained echoes of “yesterday’s world” that transcend the living present.

“Our inheritance is not left to us, we have to claim it“, wrote the French poet René Char. The image of a unique, sunken and mysterious civilization was lovingly evoked by Zdenko Lesic in the title of his anthology, published in 1995 by the Central European University Press in Budapest: *Children of Atlantis: Voices from the Former Yugoslavia*. Late, yet never too late, I add my voice to this dirge.

“The Balkan footbridge” is a collection of essays I wrote about authors, some still living and some dead, whom I view as friends. In “Balkan footbridge”, I tried to follow Char’s instruction and lay claim to some parts of the Yugoslav cultural inheritance. Through
stories and poems, and my intimate correspondence, I shed light on the history of Yugoslavia while at the same time getting lost in the dreams of their characters. I also attempt to interpret a literary style that testifies to the difficult choice between the group’s (that is the nation’s) and the individual’s freedom. By leafing through books and sketching biographies, I try to build my own personal footbridge across the chasm that today divides the conceptual and experiential frames of European Slovenia from Yugoslavia’s Balkan successors.

The Austrian chancellor Klemens Wenzel von Metternich once famously remarked that Europe ends at Vienna’s Rennweg, its main eastward-bound road, while the area to its south is inhabited by barbarians. Historical irony, however, brings us some consolation: the chancellor made his exclamation a stone’s throw away from the place where today the Vienna International Busterminal receives passengers from all over the Balkan states and now from lands much farther to the south. The Balkan Footbridge aspires to lead its readers back to the Balkans and also, in the process, goes through America where so many Yugoslav writers wound up after the wars of succession. I experience my lost Yugoslavia as a condensation of the Balkans, that is, as a historical and contemporary conglomerate of cultures and religions, languages, and nations. In the twentieth century, the inheritance of Balkan hybridity, fluidity and mixing of cultures was preserved only in Yugoslavia. Where will we find it in the twenty-first?

Remember: the world did not begin with us. I refuse to live in the “permanent now”. Tell me what you remember and I will tell you who you are. Who am I? I am a child of the Yugoslav Atlantis, a large family with many members that comprise the pieces for a portrait of a lost civilization: a corner of Zagreb’s Tresnjevka neighbourhood in Seattle and a bar stool from Sarajevo’s Mudrac Bar in Washington DC, a coffee cup from a Zemun café in Calgary, and reflections of Ljubljanica River under the bridges spanning the Amsterdam canals, gentle slopes of Fruska gora in Chicago’s black ghetto, and the sunlight rising above Sibenik and swirling around the base of the Eiffel Tower before disappearing into the gap between testimony and vision.

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