

**POLITICAL “PARADOX”: EXPLORING THE SIMULTANEOUS
AFFECTION FOR TITO AND SUPPORT FOR SERBIAN
NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the paradoxical coexistence of affection for the former leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, and support for contemporary Serbian nationalist leader Aleksandar Vučić. Through qualitative research methods, which includes a focus group discussion with six participants, the research delves into the narratives influencing Serbian political behavior. Findings suggest that the recollection of positive memories of Tito's era, characterized by economic stability and opportunities, contrast sharply with the nationalist-driven aspirations encouraged by Vučić. However, both politicians (try to) balance world powers and make Serbia a strong player in the international arena.

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2. Introduction

The history of Yugoslavia, with its tumultuous rise and fall, continues to bear its most diverse imprints on the collective memory of the Serbian people. Despite any controversy in the character of this historical period, there is a palpable nostalgia for the regime under Tito, the charismatic leader who led the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) (Spasić 2012). Research, such as that conducted by the Belgrade-based research publication center "Demostat" in 2016, shows the deep-seated affection of Serbs for Tito (Pantovic 2016). A significant proportion of the population relishes memories of the perceived security, freedom and sense of unity that prevailed in his time (Palmberger 2008). The prevailing spirit of positive nostalgia remains among many Serbs, even if voices to the contrary deplore Tito's authoritarian tendencies and the repression of dissidents.

Simultaneously, Serbia finds itself at a crossroads, influenced by the revival of nationalist rhetoric and the rise of political figures advocating the vision of Serbian hegemony (Mikuš 2018). Since the regime under former president Milošević until today, nationalist emotions have impacted the political landscape and argued for a more self-confident, aspiring Serbia on an international level (Tot 2022). Aleksandar Vučić, the incumbent president, embodies this trend, with his policies and discourse often aligning with nationalist ideals, going forward with the slogan: "*Srbija ne sme da stane*" (Serbia cannot stop) (M.J. 2023). Despite this alignment, Vučić attracts widespread support, leading to the question of this thesis: *What factors contribute to contemporary Serbians' simultaneous admiration for Tito and support for Aleksandar Vučić, who is considered a Serbian nationalist?*

In the intricate political landscape of contemporary Serbian politics, a paradox emerges, wherein the fondness for former leader of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito coexists with the support for Aleksandar Vučić, a figure associated with Serbian nationalism. Rooted in the complex sociopolitical and historical grounds of Serbia, this paper explores the complexity and hidden

sentiments of this paradox by examining the intersection of nostalgia, nationalism, and political discourse in contemporary Serbian society.

One reason why such a research question could be significant is to fill the gaps and further consolidate the understanding of historical narratives regarding the influence of former Yugoslav leader on contemporary Serbian nationalism. Another reason for why this topic is important is because it delves into the complex identity dynamics of Serbian people and the identity struggles following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Through this research political behavior and sentiment among Serbian voters can be further conceptualized which could provide implications for more effective political strategies.

In order to analyze this topic, qualitative research methods were employed by additionally using a discussion conducted with a focus group of six individuals. The individuals were asked several questions related to the research topic. As this sort of topic seems to have a lack in academic and empirical works, a significant portion of the literature review utilizes respected media outlets and articles delving into and describing several pre-requisites for the aforementioned paradox.

The discussion groups revealed that Tito is remembered with a blend of nostalgia and criticism, with the older participants viewing his era more positively, while the younger ones took a more reserved view. Vučić faces a lot of critique regarding his rhetoric and his way of running the country, nevertheless he gains recognition for his contribution to economic stability. Overall, the paradox of admiration for Tito and support for Vučić reflects complex and varying attitudes influenced by generational memories and contemporary political dynamics.

A brief introduction to the two personalities is followed by an exploration of the literature that deals with the different opinions about the two leaders in various media. This is followed by a detailed insight into the methodology used. Furthermore, an analysis of the interviews will be

made in connection with researched articles and texts. Finally, summarizing statements are made and the most important findings are presented.

A comprehensive summary of each leader's background allows for a deeper understanding of the given political paradox. Therefore, the following section provides brief biographies of these two political figures.

Background of Tito and Vučić

Josip Broz Tito was born in Kumrovec in Croatia in 1892. Before he began his political career, he was a guest worker at Daimler in Austria and Germany (Pirjevec 2018). When he was called up to the front in Galicia in 1914, he ended up in Russian captivity. After returning to Croatia, he joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1934, and adopted the Pseudonym "Tito" (Newman 2013). In 1940 he was appointed General Secretary, which marked the beginning of his political career as a liberation fighter as the leader of the Partisan movement in the fight against fascism under the premise "Bratstvo I Jedinstvo" (Brotherhood and Unity) (Ognjenović, and Jozelić 2016). Subsequently he was elected Prime Minister of Yugoslavia in 1945, where his popularity began to grow.

Tito aimed to distinguish his governance from Stalin's, therefore he established a new model of communism, rather it being socialism, "Titoism" (Campbell 1980). It did bring forms of repression with it, but Titoism offered self-managed companies to grow, social security, free education, and the freedom to travel (Gyorgy 1959). As Stalin and Tito did not agree on each other's styles of governing, the notable rebellion against Stalin is still widely regarded as his greatest achievement (Bing 2018). His economic strategies transformed the country from an agrarian-based economy to an industrialized one in the brief span of two decades (Chittle 1975).

Despite the open demonstration of liberal political rules as a provocation to Moscow, Tito cultivated an authoritarian style of government in his country (Vladislavljević 2008). Anyone

who openly professed Stalinism was banished to the island of "Goli Otok" (Naked Island), where they were punished and had to perform forced labor (Previšić, Stamenic, and Bralic 2020). However, people held on to their opinion that the island spread fear and served as a warning sign for the population and was therefore acceptable (Tasić 2023).

After the death of Stalin around 1953, Yugoslavia drew closer to the Soviet Union and from then on gained many contacts abroad, for example with England, Egypt, the USA and Germany (Arbutina 2020). Tito also managed to unite 25 representatives of “third world” countries in Belgrade, which then formed the Union of Non-Aligned States (Ancic 2017). Evidence of his successful foreign policy emerged on the day of his funeral, after his death on the 4th of May 1980. *“Four kings, 31 presidents, 22 prime ministers, 47 foreign ministers and delegations from over 120 countries”* around the world gathered to mourn the loss of "Druze Tito" (Comrade Tito) (MDR 2021).

The ethnically and religiously very heterogeneous state of the time survived Titos absence for another decade, but due to the loss of his integrative power as a charismatic leader, it could not be stopped for much longer (Manchester Historian 2020). The dissolution of Yugoslavia was thus initiated by a bloody, cruel war, which even today has carved its wounds deep into the people (Coulson 1993). Years later, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, a new era was ushered in, that of the current President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.

Aleksandar Vučić, born in Belgrade in 1970, spent his formative years in the Serbian capital, Belgrade. Pursuing his academic aspirations, he enrolled in law studies, finishing with a distinguished graduation. His professional trajectory transitioned into the media sector, where he went with the role of a journalist, specializing in international affairs. In 1993, Vučić made a pivotal decision to affiliate himself with the "Srpska radikalna stranka" (Serbian Radical Party), swiftly ascending to the position of General Secretary within the party's hierarchy (Demand 2022).

Rapidly becoming a prominent figure within the SRS, he traveled the world, representing the SRS under the leadership of Vojislav Šešelj, who later faced allegations of war crimes at the UN tribunal in The Hague (Grebo 2024). From 1998 to 2000, he served as the Minister of Information in the administration of Mirko Marjanović. From 2003 on, he has been a leader together with Tomislav Nikolić of the SRS, a party openly opposed to international justice and any rapprochement with the European Union. Due to the internal conflicts triggered by the government in office at the time, the SRS was able to quickly gain influence. In 2008, Vučić decided to leave the SRS to join a newly founded party, the so-called Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Not long after, he was elected chairman of that party in 2012 (Demand 2022). He then held the post of Minister of Defense for a year, which he then left in 2014 when he was elected Prime Minister of Serbia. He remained in this position for three years but was elected head of state for the first time in 2017 and secured the title for a second time in 2022 (Demand 2022).

3. From Past to Present in Serbian Politics: Tito's Shadow, Vučić's Path

“Nostalgia, ..., can often be seen as an expression of contradictions and contentions at the heart of these alliances.” (Kojanic 2015)

To gain an understanding of the proposition of this paradox, one must begin with an introduction about nostalgia in general. When people are nostalgic, it's about selective memory (Bancroft 2009). Hence the often-associated paradox of why people are nostalgic for an era when there were also less pleasant events during that time. They block out what is negative and remember the good things.

It is not only in Serbia and the remaining countries of the former Yugoslavia that such a phenomenon can be seen. There are also cases of nostalgia in Germany, which emerged in the 1990s, a so-called "Ostalgie", the longing for the German Democratic Republic among East Germans (Boyer 2006). “Ostalgie” is expressed in positive memories of everyday objects,

customs, and ways of life in the GDR that were no longer there after reunification. People found the abrupt transition to the new market economy and the loss of familiar structures disconcerting (Blum 2000). The phenomenon is a sign that the GDR past is not only perceived as a repressive regime, but also as a time with specific social securities and feelings of community (Boyer 2006).

This is an explanation that can be transferred to Yugonostalgia as well. In Yugoslavia, conclusions regarding nostalgia emerged that people here mourn less the past, but rather the possibilities of that time (Bancroft 2009). They lament the security once experienced, both in their employment, as they hardly expressed the fear of losing their work position, and also in their social circles (Lindstrom 2005). Additionally, there was a distinct sense of belonging, once to a state that offered numerous opportunities and generally ensured a more favorable life (Maksimović 2017). However, within the realm of Yugonostalgia, there is another significant aspect that plays a crucial role, which is intrinsically linked to the former leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito.

“Yugoslavia held together not by commonly accepted 'gevens' of nationhood but by coercive ideology Tito's personality and sheer force when necessary.” (Norbu 1999)

One of the best-known works on Tito is the extensive biography "Tito and his Comrades" by the Slovenian-Italian researcher Joze Pirjevec, published in 2012 (Mappes-Niediek 2013). In it, he addresses the strengths of the communist leader on the one hand, but also speaks openly about his darker sides on the other. This includes the stories of the prison camps, but also the proud legacy of Tito as one of the few who stood up to Stalin (Pirjevec 2018). There are various books about Tito, including several works that deal with the perception of the regime and the period. In Ivana Spasic's paper "Yugoslavia as a Place for Living a Normal Life: Memories of Ordinary People in Serbia", published in 2012, she interviews Serbs and asks them about their view of the once unified country (Spasić 2012). She points out that she found an interesting

result, namely that none of the interviewees mentioned any oppression or other form of deprivation of liberty in their narrative. On the contrary, they spoke of better politics and a more pleasant life (Spasić 2012).

Aleksandar Vučić himself also described Tito as a " *smart guy*", but also as a " *communist dictator*" (Karnitschnig 2017a). Nevertheless, he is grateful for Tito's skills, as he revealed in an interview with POLITICO magazine after his first win in 2017. He admires Tito's ability to connect people and wants to do the same (Karnitschnig 2017a). Tito was a charismatic leader, one who knew how to mobilize many and unite several (Norbu 1999). Even after his death, many places commemorate him. In Belgrade, numerous pubs and cafes still exist that harken back to the Yugoslav era. These establishments host many individuals who reminisce about life during that period, including younger generations, who recount stories passed down by the elderly. One venue is "Kafana Pavle Korcagin", where the walls are adorned with pictures of Tito, creating an atmosphere that lays ground for past stories (Knüppel and Götzke 2016).

Another publication, a book by Dejan Jović's, "Yugoslavia, A State that Withered Away", depicts a large part of the population that was being supportive of Tito, in contrast with a small minority of dissenters. Tito was seen as the only capable man of ensuring Yugoslavia's stability, which created widespread trust among the people (Jović 2009). As mentioned before, there are countless publications about Tito and his practices, in contrast to Vučić, where one comes across more articles related to the fact that his era is still recent.

As one interviewee said in the interview: "*It seems to me that anyone who is interested in Serbia and current events cannot find real and transparent information about politics, elections, etc.*", this is also applicable for the research efforts of this paper. Since this thesis focuses on Serbia, the aim is to include Serbian media and not just use the Western channels. This can be seen as an incentive to enable as diverse of an examination of the topic as possible. Currently, there is a dearth of literature and scholarly discourse concerning this paradox. However, numerous

publications within the Serbian context do delve into paradoxes such as the integration into the European Union (EU), which are also discussed in the present thesis. The Paradox lies in Serbia's historical inclination towards the East, culturally being more aligned with Moscow than Brussels, yet currently longing for Western integration with the EU (Huennekens 2018).

As outlined in the previous part of the bachelor thesis, Vučić has had a dynamic past. Due to his participation in the SRS and the associated nationalist rhetoric in the 1990s, he is criticized by many political opponents. Numerous accusations and criticisms have been leveled against him, holding allegations of autocratic tendencies and attributions of responsibility for the nation's economic challenges. Moreover, the aftermath of the 2017 electoral proceedings saw a wave of protests within the public sphere (Demand 2022). Despite these happenings following his election victory, Vučić remained resolute and saw dissent as a sign of healthy democracy. According to the article "Serbia's plan to bring back (best of) Yugoslavia" in POLITICO by Matthew Karnitschnig, he was aware of the challenges posed by ethnic tensions during his campaigning but believed that cooperation in addition to the support of the EU would gain the upper hand (Karnitschnig 2017b).

Several reports and interviews deal with the so-called "face of Serbia". *"I see Vučić as a populist, a classic populist, with authoritarian personality traits."*(N1 2020). He uses skillful rhetoric's in which his disputes are often portrayed as a violation of the Serbian community in for example Kosovo, using emotional appeals and nationalist sentiments (Wölfl 2023). Kosovo is therefore another issue being played out in the political discourse, where Vučić is again dealing with a lot of critique. An example of this is the feud in February 2024 between Serbian President Vučić and Kosovo Prime minister Kurti over issues such as license plates and currency (Çerkini 2024). The international community, however, including the West and intellectual circles, largely views Serbia's claims over Kosovo as obstructive and misplaced. Tackling the Kosovo-Dilemma points to a strategic agenda focusing on maintaining the

influence rather than the aforementioned concern for the welfare of the Serbian minority in Kosovo (Shkruar nga 2024).

The pressure from the West to distance itself from Russia and the simultaneous internal push to closer ties with Moscow are creating an even more complicated political climate for Serbia and its leader (Shkruar nga 2024). In general, on the one front, European entities advocate for democratic reforms and collaboration, while concurrently, Serbian nationalist groupings, frequently linked to the Orthodox Church, are influencing internally to resurge aspirations aligned with the concept of Greater Serbia. He thus finds himself at a crossroads and must weigh up these two powerful denominators (Bechev 2023). Consequently, Vučić's efforts to imitate Tito's leadership paradigm and foster a unified Yugoslavia, although with his unique approach, encounters formidable obstacles attributable to the intricate history within the region and the neighboring nations' devoted rejection of Serbian dominance (Shkruar nga 2024).

This dominance is reflected not only in the many contacts that Vučić makes use of, but also in his further plans to improve economic relations in the Western Balkans. He emphasizes the potential for a free trade zone between the former Yugoslavian states (International Crisis Group 2022). He does not want to completely unite the countries as Tito did back then, but he also refrains from wholly handing over the interconnectedness among these nations. Vučić, therefore, wants to promote regional stability through economic integration, which is demonstrated, for example, by infrastructural developments such as the bridge between Belgrade and Sarajevo (Karnitschnig 2017b). This is not just about economic gains, but a symbolic sign, a bridge between ethnic groups, reminiscent of the old Yugoslavia. This exploration seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of why people simultaneously admire Tito and support Vučić. He manages to win over voters by promoting projects that rekindle a sense of favorable unity (Karnitschnig 2017b).

“Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is using a double game to gain political freedom of movement.” (Veser 2023)

Central to Vučić’s diplomatic agenda is his juggling of relations with both the EU and Russia, as noted previously, a move that elicits varied responses domestically and abroad. Since the Ukraine-Russia war a majority of countries imposed sanctions on Russia, where Vučić is abstaining from participation, underpinning the importance of his relationship with President Putin (Vellenzer 2023). While he is again being criticized and accused of him escalating tensions for personal gain, Vučić remains committed to EU accession, with Germany being his key ally (Drüten 2023).

The result of such situations can be seen in an interview with Janusz Bugajski, an expert from the Center for European Policy Analysis: *“The problem for Serbia is that they are trying to imitate Tito. Vučić currently believes that he is a little Tito and that he can balance certain global forces in Serbia's favor. The difference is that Yugoslavia was a major player in the international arena and was very successful in balancing East and West.”* (Al Jazeera Balkans 2020) It becomes evident from the compilation of articles referenced that Vučić employs persuasive rhetoric, effectively convincing a substantial segment of the Serbian population with his propositions. However, the sentiment taken from this work is that despite his political prowess, he remains different from Tito and is unlikely to repeat his predecessor’s legacy, as also found evident in the interview conducted for this thesis.

Furthermore, one well-known Index, the US Freedom House Index declared Serbia as a “Hybrid regime” and “Partly free” in its 2024 Serbia Country Report and Regions in Transits Report. This was mostly on the basis of elections not being conducted in accordance with the rules and media freedom being suppressed (Freedom House 2024). Indeed, John Keane’s notion of “phantom democracy”, named by Vedran Dzihic from the Austrian Institute for International Politics (OIIP) in an interview with “Wiener Zeitung”, aptly captures the essence of the current

regime, wherein democratic procedures remain intact, yet the actual mechanisms of governance exhibit authoritarian tendencies (Lechner 2020). This characterization aligns closely with the Freedom House's classification of Serbia's government as a hybrid regime, underscoring the blend of democratic and authoritarian elements within the country.

Additionally, there are also credible allegations against Vučić and the SNS being linked to organized crime and instances of nepotism. In the article "Serbia must choose soon between Despotism and Rational State" by Vedran Dzihic published on 7th of September 2020, he emphasizes the importance of choosing between two ways Serbia could go. Either they decide to comply with the "*illusionary democracy*" and the unfulfilled commitment of joining the EU, or the "*conscious rejection of Vučić's regime*", which again demonstrates vividly the position of the critics (Dzihic 2020).

Nevertheless, still 58.59% of Serbs voted for Vučić, who is the man who in many respects is considered a danger to Serbia or is referred to as an autocrat (Vučković 2022). What are the reasons for this?

"They point to the Vučić era as one of unprecedented growth, of a post-communist country overshadowed by war becoming an advanced, European economy." (Vock and Georgievski 2023)

Frequently observed, as corroborated in the interviews, is the tendency to attribute the consolidation of support for populist leaders only to their usage of illiberal tactics. However, such analysis overlooks the fact that voters may be inclined to overlook democratic deficits if they perceive the leader as a capable man making a more prosperous state or if the alternatives appear less favorable (Kekic 2024). Additionally, this would mean that voters were easy to manipulate, and this might come off as too harsh of a statement to make.

Despite sufficient criticism, Serbia's development trajectory also shows positive facets. Aleksandar Vučić has orchestrated a turn for the country across various dimensions in the short time of him being the head of state. Since 2013, the construction of approximately 530 kilometers (status until 2023) of motorways has been done and driving significant economic revitalization (Petkovic 2023). Efforts to enhance railroad connectivity are serving the population and due to enormous investments, it generates employment opportunities for the community. Notable strides have also been observed in social welfare, shown by substantial increases in pensions and wages. Concurrently, the unemployment rate, according to the World Bank, has sunk from 24% in 2012 to under 9% in 2024 (World Bank Open Data, n.d.). Moreover, considerable advancements were achieved in the healthcare system by establishing new healthcare facilities and making them more accessible to the majority. Lastly, significant funding is flowing into the new artificial intelligence research at the Bio4Campus, fostering an environment for students and companies wanting to expand their knowledge in this area (Mörgeli 2023).

To conclude this section of the paper, the multifaceted review of Tito and Vučić offers a rich ground for historical continuities and contemporary challenges. While Tito's regime was characterized by a charismatic, but authoritarian control, Vučić seeks to overtake some of his qualities and make Serbia a strong economic player. The next section will explain the process of conducting the interviews and continue with the results and analysis of such.

4. Methodology

The paper uses qualitative research, which is supplemented by a discussion with a focus group and the usage of a documentary film about Aleksandar Vučić, shown partly to the participants. The discussion group has been done in a semi-structured format in which the participants were asked 13 questions one after the other, which they could answer freely. The 13 questions have been selected based on the actual research question of the reasons behind voting for Vučić while

missing Tito's regime. The selected group consists of six Serbian citizens, three of whom lived during the Yugoslav period and have memories of it. The other three interviewees were born after the wars and therefore did not experience Tito's regime, but they lived or live in Serbia. The participants were selected based on snowball sampling. It was ensured that both men and women were interviewed. The interviewees belong to the middle-income bracket, are students or already retired. The interview was conducted via the video conferencing website Zoom, to which each participant was sent a link. At the beginning, the participants introduced themselves by name, age, place of birth and current place of residence. For data protection reasons, the names are anonymized and written "Woman 1" or "Man 1" above them. After the round of introductions, the first question was introduced and there was a strict obligation to listen, which could only be interrupted by giving a signal on Zoom. As the participants did not have the same opinion, interruptions were actively prevented through a facilitator. Initially, very general questions were asked about life in Yugoslavia and the political situation under Tito's rule. This was followed by questions about the current Serbian situation, Tito's influences, and the government under Vučić. Two video excerpts of two speeches by Vučić taken from the documentary "Vladalac", politička biografija Aleksandra Vučića, prvi deo ("The Ruler", the political biography of Aleksandar Vučić, part one) were then shown to the participants and their opinions were asked. Those excerpts were deliberately chosen as they contain two of his perhaps best-known statements, which were considered controversial and radical by many. The discussion was concluded with the question of if they would say that this simultaneous affection for Tito and giving the vote to Vučić is indeed a paradox. Half of the participants answered affirmatively, the other half negatively. In any case, focus groups as a methodological approach cannot claim to be representative in the usual sense, nor is that their aim; their intention is to gather as broad and diverse a range of opinions as possible and, through free discussion, to crystallize certain pools of issues that prove to be important points of reference for the participants, be they points of agreement or mutual disagreement. The participants provided

written consent to be interviewed, and their responses were authorized for inclusion in this paper. The questions asked in the discussion, can be found at Appendix 1. Additionally, a transcript of the interview is to be found at Appendix 2, which is translated in English by me, as the discussion was in Serbian.

5. Perceptions of Leadership in Serbia – Tito vs. Vučić

This part of the text deals with the analysis of the discussion, which took place between six individuals. As already explained in the methodology section, the names of the candidates are not mentioned, but a brief explanation of each participant is given here in Table 1 in order to be able to better classify their answers and draw conclusions.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Name	Age	Place of Residence	Tito/Yugoslavia (overall feelings)	Vučić (overall feelings)
Woman 1	74	Belgrade	Positive, nostalgic	Positive, proud voter
Woman 2	50	Sid	Mixed, nostalgic, critical	Negative, considerate of positive aspects
Woman 3	46	Munich (moved there after 2021)	Mixed, nostalgic, critical	Negative, considerate of positive aspects
Man 1	24	Vienna (returning to Belgrade shortly)	Mixed, sharing knowledge gained from family/school	Negative, critical
Man 2	25	Belgrade	Negative, considerate, critical	Negative, critical
Man 3	31	Novi Sad	Mixed, considerate, critical	Negative, considerate of positive aspects

This analysis is organized into three distinct sections. The initial part focuses on Tito and how he is perceived as a leader. Following that, the analysis will delve into Aleksandar Vučić's

persona and how people see him. Finally, the last section will establish a connection between the two individuals and obtain an opinion on the aforementioned paradox.

How did the interviewees perceive Tito?

Everyone involved, regardless of age, had at least one positive quality to contribute to Tito. The majority described him as a "*good politician*" (Man 2), which can be interpreted either positively or negatively. On the one hand, it was a positive quality for the respondents, because he managed to lead a country, drive it economically and guarantee people a certain amount of freedom. He turned his existence into a cult personality, a charismatic leader whom many faithfully followed. On the other hand, the term "good politician" has negative connotations, as he is also referred to as a "*world manipulator*" (Woman 3) and "*foreign agent*" (Woman 3). It is difficult to draw a connection between the answers in relation to the age group of the respondents. The oldest person remembers very positive aspects of Tito, even when it comes to the horrors that took place at "Goli Otok" during his time, she finds a way not to be overly critical of him. The younger students see him as a man who promoted his policies well. One might have expected more negativity here, but this is revealed by another question about the Tito regime. The "Goli Otok" was known to all those involved, they criticize the way things were done there, but nevertheless end their argument with the necessity of such a condition. The necessity in this case refers to the fact that a country can only be run well if dissenters and those who refuse to abide by the regime are detained.

One of the three men, who was born shortly before the Yugoslav Wars, was particularly keen to say that "*he did not build a sustainable state after his death*". Although he understands the cult and nostalgia surrounding Tito, he has serious doubts about the period after his death in what was then Yugoslavia, which was followed by incompetent statesmen, disorganization and ultimately the fall of the country.

When asked about Tito and the time, the interviewees expressed a wide range of emotions. The older the person was, the more you could see their enjoyment of the subject, their body language, and the words they selected. They liked to talk about that time, whether it was extremely positive or critical, they liked to remember life back then. Woman 1 could hardly hold back her tears when she spoke about that time. Especially when she uttered the following words "*We were smiling from morning till night, as they say. I would never exchange it for our time. It was a time of joy.*" These sentences made her cry. In general, she had a very emotional voice throughout the group discussion, shaky when she talked about the past and tense when she talked about the here and now.

When Woman 2 had her say, you could see that the words of Woman 1 had really affected her. Although she was still a child in Tito's time, she also remembers it very positively. "*Tito was a leader we sang to,*" (Woman 2) She had tears in her eyes and drank a sip of water after every second sentence. It was not easy for her to talk about the past, not because she saw it as negative, on the contrary, she missed it.

It was noticeable among the younger people that they had obtained their information mainly through relatives and their school careers. They showed less euphoria about discussing the topic, but listened intently to the others as they answered the questions. They were curious to hear what people had to say about life, almost as if they were sitting in front of contemporary witnesses and had never had the chance to get such close and rare information. Man 2, who was very concise with answering most of the questions, seemed to be very interested in asking more questions, but he nonetheless held back.

To conclude this part of the analysis, it should be said that despite his shortcomings and autocratic style of government, Tito is still held in high esteem by many. Not necessarily because of the way he implemented his policies, but rather because of his personality and the achievements he accomplished for the country. No matter what time you were born, every single

one of the participants had something nice to say about that time, whether it was very personal or the fact that he "*managed to keep together the wild Balkan tribes*" (Woman 3).

How did the Interviewees perceive Vučić?

Continuing, Vučić receives more criticism in this discussion than Tito. Opinions are very unevenly divided here. The oldest lady (Woman 1) is very positive about him and his actions. The other candidates mention positive aspects of him and his policies, but overall, they are negative towards him. Woman 2 complains about his rhetoric, which she has issues with, but thanks him for a stable economy in the country. She also states that "*the world accepts him as the leader of the nation*". When she uttered this sentence, it was noticeable that she did not say this because she thought so out of her own conviction, she found it rather reprehensible that it was accepted, questionable, that's how she appeared. Man 3 agrees with her in this respect, as he created opportunities for the state that others had not realized before his time. Nevertheless, for him he is "*a new dictator who bases power on a party apparatus that gives him unconditional support for personal gain*".

When the word dictator was mentioned, you could tell that Woman 1's previously euphoric, nostalgic mood quickly turned into an angry and opinionated one. "*I don't like the word Dictator; but many call him that..., It's a very harsh word and they use it today as if it's a seasoning in every soup.*" (Woman 1) She quickly became very defensive and ended her argument with a throwback rhetorical question, provocative one might say, as she countered the others "*But let other countries that have had colonies for years ask themselves what their democracy is like?*" She was met with agreement, as Woman 3 introduced her answer by nodding her head and saying, "*You are very right, we tend to forget how bad other countries have it, and still call themselves democracies.*"

For others he is once again labeled as a good politician, but this should be interpreted in a significantly negative way, as such statements are followed by the usage of descriptions such

as “*terrible statesman*” (Man 2). Furthermore, according to Woman 3, he is a “*great manipulator*” and therefore just the right person to lead uneducated people, as she states. Despite disbanding fellow participants, like Woman 1, the others did not hold back and expressed their honest opinion of the politician. You could feel the frustration in Man 1's words, as well as his stated disappointment with the Serbian state. “*Vučić is a mirror of our decades-long misery.*”

In the middle of the conversation, two video clips about Vučić were shown. In the first excerpt, taken from the video “Vladalac”, politicka biografija Aleksandra Vučića, prvi deo” (“The Ruler”, political biography of Aleksandar Vučić, part one, minute 24:45 - 25:16), a political speech by Vučić from 1995, shortly before the massacre in Srebrenica, a town in Bosnia, was shown. His words are well known, as he has often had to distance himself from them or justify them: “*You bomb, kill one Serb, we'll kill a hundred Muslims*”. In the second clip, which was shown, he is also seen at a conference in 2000 and comments on the desire that certain territories such as Karlovac, which are Croatian, belong to the Serbian state. He begins by saying that they (the Serbian state) do not want anything foreign, neither then nor now, but only what is theirs. He then goes on to list these Croatian cities. Even today he must distance himself from these statements, which he does by making excuses or blaming them on his puberty and his membership of the radical party and its rhetoric at the time. It should not go unmentioned that this documentary is broadcast on the N1 channel, which belongs to the United Group and often complains about the lack of media freedom in Serbia (Odobasić 2022). This also explains the rather subjective reporting in this film and the negative narrative towards Vučić.

After the first video clip was shown, the emotions were clearly limited to the negative ones. The participants all looked at the floor for about ten seconds before Man 1 spoke. “*I am ashamed, that this is our head of state*” (Man 1). They shook their heads in despair, put their hands over their faces in shame or sighed quietly to themselves. Although Man 3 and Woman

1 did not like the statements, they felt the need to explain this rhetoric to the others. *"He did not come up with it, and it does not reflect his originality. The same policy was implemented by the Germans during World War II in Serbia."* (Man 3). So, the rhetoric that Vučić used in this video was not his own. Woman 1 then elaborated on this and concluded that this was a *"media war"*, *"a double-edged sword"*. She said that everyone twists things around to suit themselves, and that he did indeed apologize for these *"terrible times"*.

Woman 2's reaction was also agitated. She drank several sips of water before she gathered herself and said: *"A serious politician should never utter such words"*. She had always been very careful with her words up to this point and refused to embrace the vulgar language, but after this video she too became sidetracked and sighed *"What a s**tshow!"*. Woman 3 then did not hesitate to express her opinion and she told everyone that there is currently a resolution regarding Srebrenica and that she is delighted that everything will finally be revealed. Here she also clearly stated her position that she was against Vučić.

After the participants had commented on the first video excerpt, a second one was played. Again, the reactions in each facial expression were immediately recognizable. Woman 1 explained that this was the idea of Šešelj, the former leader of the radical party and his desire for a Greater Serbia. She acknowledged the flaws in the former ideology, hinting at a possible perceived evolution in Vučić's career. *"I'm not justifying him, that was the rhetoric of the radical party, the man left that party and founded this one. In every grain there are weeds, he has flaws too."* (Woman 1). She often used idiomatic expressions to explain her point, which is a marked difference from the younger participants, who did not use them at all.

Man 1 and Man 2 responded similarly by stating that they are critical towards his nationalist rhetoric, viewing it as impractical, seeming to forget that Kosovo's independence was then already a topic. (What is meant here, is that from 1990 until now, Kosovo tried to gain independence and segregate from Serbia, becoming their own state (Landeszentrale für

politische Bildung Baden Württemberg, n.d.).) They associated his speeches with clear populism. Also, Woman 3 was mentioning Kosovo, stating that he forgot of what is his, instead of poking around wanting what is someone else's. Man 3 is also beside himself with disbelief. He does not support this rhetoric either and insinuates that it has caused a lot of suffering to the Croatian and Serbian people. Nevertheless, he points to today's politics in Croatia of the HDZ party, which employed the same statements back then. *"They were all making the same mistakes, some change, some don't. Most of them didn't."* (Man 3)

To finalize this section, two main conclusions can be drawn, the first of which is that Vučić is successful in his efforts to drive Serbia's economy and mobilize people. He is both praised and criticized for this, as mass mobilization is often associated with manipulation. Secondly, he is seen by most as a power monger, a populist, for his rhetoric then and now. As previously mentioned, a discussion group of six people is not representative of any kind, but it does offer an understanding of certain opinions from which one can draw inferences.

The Paradox

The paradox dealt with in this work is about the simultaneous love for Tito and the massive spread of nationalism in today's Serbia. The interviewees were asked whether they saw this as a paradox. Once again, opinions were divided. Woman 2 did not see this as a paradox, as both developed a kind of *"cult of personality"* and this creates trust in the electorate. Man 2 had the same views and said: *"Balkan people mostly prefer a 'firm hand', so that is 'normal'"*. Woman 1 did not clearly state whether she felt it was one, but she mentioned similarities and differences between the two figures. She saw Vučić's commitment to building roads and enabling the rapid flow of capital as similarities. She is also firmly convinced that Serbia is *"multicultural"*. The only difference she recognizes is the rhetoric that Vučić used at the time, which Tito never had. Man 3, on the other hand, believed this was not a paradox. *"Parties whose politics are based on the will of one person who builds a cult of personality are in power because of those people*

and not because of the proclaimed party policy." He thus explained that although Vučić pursued a different ideology to Tito at the time, his personality, his striving to create a name and 'the' personality par excellence, made him very similar to the then leader Tito. Nevertheless, he finds it paradoxical that a person would vote for both, because they have, after all, adopted a different style of governance.

However, the opposing side of the discussion saw this as a clear paradox. This was followed by a very deeply personal statement from Man 1, who spoke about the incomprehensibly bad life in Serbia today. *"...it is almost impossible to live worse than at the present moment when Vučić has been ruling for a long time and it's only getting worse."* (Man 1) He acknowledges that Tito's regime had its limitations but reveals that it could not have been worse than it is today. Woman 3 agrees with him, because during Tito's time life was good and today it is *"catastrophically bad"*.

There was a recognizable pattern in the discussion group, because at the beginning when the questions were a bit more open, people generally spoke very positively about the time. It was only when the question became more specific and particular events during Tito's time were mentioned that some participants had something negative to say. As far as Vučić was concerned, most of them had a rather negative attitude right from the start and were therefore very critical from the beginning on.

Regarding the general analysis that can be taken from this discussion and the sources used, it is clear that older generations who lived in Tito's era and saw it as a pleasant time also accept Vučić with open arms (Odobashić 2021, 41). The many benefits for pensioners can also be used as an illustration to demonstrate the president's popularity. They are the beneficiaries of pension increases and bonuses from the state being the first to receive them (Deutschlandfunk 2023). This is less the case with the younger generation. They are very furious, critical and resentful of Serbia's current government (Beck 2023). In the past a significant portion of the young

electorate abstained from going to vote. Also in the given discussion, some revealed that they no longer participated in voting. However, forecasts indicate a shift in this behavior. Presently, youth express a desire to actively participate and initiate change. The Serbian National Youth Council (KOMS) predicts that this trend will evolve, as motivation to instigate governmental reforms is growing stronger (Bodine 2022).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis set out to answer the question of why Serbs simultaneously favor Tito, a proponent of unification, and vote for Aleksandar Vučić, a populist leader, often also named dictator. Initially this scenario is presented as a paradox due to the stark differences in their leadership style and ideologies. The paper delves into extensive research and conducts a discussion group with six Serbian citizens to gain deeper insights.

The research reveals that Tito remains a highly controversial subject among people. On the one hand, those who lived through his era often reminisce about the life they had before, being qualitative, appreciative of the economic stability, job security, and other social benefits they have experienced. This sentiment is supported by both the discussion group findings and existing literature. On the other hand, younger generations, who learn about Tito's regime second-hand through schools or relatives, exhibit a more critical position towards his legacy.

Regarding Vučić, the discussion group had significant dissatisfaction, especially expressing the disapproval of his rhetoric and how he controls the state. Despite this, there is an acknowledgement of the economic stability and reforms that improved the living standards for Serbs. One participant, Woman 1, does however embody the paradox as discussed: she nostalgically values Tito while simultaneously appreciating and voting Vučić.

This work still argues for the existence of a paradox, but it acknowledges the commonalities between the two leaders. Both have navigated complex landscapes, balancing relations with the

West, China, and Russia to benefit Serbia (or once Yugoslavia) economically and politically. Additionally, they have also aimed to advance the country, with Tito's focus being a creation of a unified, prosperous Yugoslavia and Vučić striving to enhance the global standing of Serbia through infrastructure and other improvements.

The paradox nevertheless persists, due to the distinct approaches and ideologies of the two leaders. Tito's vision of a multi-national Yugoslavia is in deep contrast with Vučić's focus on the rise of Serbia. While both are seen as charismatic leaders and good politicians, the nature of their leadership differentiates in core, underscoring the complexity of the given paradox.

The discussion group, though insightful, had its limitations. The absence of older men, who might have offered a different perspective represent a notable gap. Additionally, the participants predominantly did not fit into the paradox, which suggests that age and or generational differences play a role in political perceptions. Nevertheless, participants themselves did partially think of it as a paradox, hinting at better living conditions then vs. now. Younger individuals also tend to be more critical of current politics, which could serve as an explanation for the prevailing disapproval of Vučić among the interviewees.

By positioning these findings within the existing literature, this thesis adds to the nuanced understanding of Serbian politics. It tries to highlight the intricate relationship between nostalgia for Tito's era and acceptance of Vučić today, revealing a yet not fully addressed topic in previous studies.

Future research can therefore aim for a broader demographic, to gain a more comprehensive view of the paradox. Also, if possible, the political leanings and background of the participants can be explored in more detail, which could provide further insights into the interplay between age, gender, experience, and political affection. Further research can also make a great contribution to existing literature on political nostalgia.

7. Appendix 1: Discussion Group Questions

- a. Maybe first that we all get to know each other a little, where are you from, when were you born, and where do you live now. And then the question: What was life like in Yugoslavia?
- b. What is your perception of Tito?
- c. How do you see the political climate during Yugoslavia and Tito's time, maybe even with a comparison to today's Serbia? And how the same is said about Tito that he was a dictator, but from your story, that doesn't sound like it to me. I've read a lot about how people were sent to Goli Otok if they didn't agree with Tito.
- d. What is your view of Vučić? What kind of Politician is he?
- e. What is he to you?
- f. What do you think, how much has Tito's legacy influenced the shaping of present-day Serbia?
- g. How much do you know about Aleksandar Vučić?
- h. A few pieces of information, and then I'd like your opinions on it: Do you know about the Freedom House Index? It's done every year, and measures how free a country is. Last year, the Freedom House Index calculated that Serbia is Partly Free and a hybrid Regime, as the elections are not conducted according to the rules and media freedom is suppressed. How do you see this?
- i. Why were there protests in Serbia when Vučić was re-elected?
- j. What do you think about the statement that it is possible that Vučić and his party are working with organized crime?
- k. Vučić was previously in the radical party, I'll show you a video, then you tell me what you think about it?
- l. Would you vote for Vučić and Tito if there were a possibility again?
- m. Would you say that someone who is at the same time for Tito and for Vučić, who are still different in their politics, would that be called a Paradox?

8. Appendix 2: Transcript of the Discussion

Ema: "Maybe first that we all get to know each other a little, where are you from, when were you born, and where do you live now. And then the question: What was life like in Yugoslavia?"

Woman 1: "I was born in 1950, which means post-war child, after World War II in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My father, Daddy, was from Bosnia, but the whole Family before him was from Serbia, but sometimes that wasn't asked, you were Yugoslavian. Growing up was decent and nice. I stayed there until I was 13. Just growing up in the middle of Vukovar, Croatia, I quickly adapted. At that time, Vukovar was full of Serbs and Croats. I stayed there for the next 30 years, worked, got married, and had two children. Now I'm in Belgrade. But the system that was post-war at that time was full of joy, full of desires, full of possibilities. Where we had various opportunities to educate ourselves, to work, education was free, healthcare was free, various events from sports to cultural (fields). We had a lot of love, a lot of traveling, a lot of friends. We had freedom, our passport, Yugoslavia's passport, the so-called red passport was one of the most esteemed passports in the world, historians and many scientists can confirm that. We were a country of freedom, love, prosperity. There were so-called work actions, where the land was being developed after the Second World War. We had freedom, we could sleep wherever we wanted, nothing happened to us. Compared to this day, at 74, where drugs are number one, crime is number two, or vice versa, (where today's youth is), I am very sorry, very. And even if they were born today in the era of the new age, technological development, I'm not saying that's bad, quite the contrary, it's good, but a lot of evil has been used, in my understanding, we socialized much more. And that's why I really don't like the narrative about former Yugoslavia, that it was then, because it was called communist, then socialist, where that's not true, we can confirm that with this many years, whoever wanted to educate themselves could finish all possible faculties. We even had the first so-called private entrepreneurs, who built around the world. Today's youth is very deprived, compared to how we had it and how it was available to us, a person could choose, as desired, we had that. I often say that material things dictated spiritual ones, and that's something everyone has to pay for, it means everything revolves around money. I'm not saying that money isn't important in life, but our system was much better for humanity. We were "multicultural." We were smiling from morning till night, as they say. I would never exchange it for our time. It was a time of joy. We had an airport, agricultural fields. We had a big country, with 24 million inhabitants, where we rejoiced in every new success, and we progressed quickly. In my lifetime, I even experienced having the Olympic Games in Sarajevo in 1984 in my country. I'm very sorry that my country fell apart. Unfortunately, while we were falling apart, some got rich. Today's decaying capitalism, I don't rejoice. Wars everywhere, I'm sorry. We are all someone's children, I'm sorry for everyone. But in my opinion, no country on the planet will ever experience or have what our great country had."

Woman 2: "I am 50 years old and I was born in Sid, which is in Serbia. For me, it was carefree, I was a child."

Man 2: "I am 25, living in Belgrade. I consider it unsustainable and unfair. The people were less divided, everyone lived similarly, but the economic system didn't work."

Man 3: "I was born on May 16, 1983, in Vukovar, Republic of Croatia, residence Novi Sad, Republic of Serbia. I mostly have knowledge about life in the former SFRJ from older people than me, given my age, meaning that I was a child then. People who experienced the best years

of the former country describe life in it as beautiful. However, what is undisputed and what I could see for myself based on abandoned factories, houses, and especially in smaller places, is that people had more opportunities to work and were more satisfied with their lives. Also, looking at what was built at that time, it is clear to me that work was done based on plans and with respect for procedures, which is a rare case today."

Woman 3: "Born 1978 in Belgrade, now I'm in Munich for a few years, but until 2021 I lived in Belgrade. Life in Yugoslavia was happy for all classes, safe, good social policies, free education and healthcare, a prosperous state, strong industry, and economy."

Man 1: "Born in 2000 in Belgrade, currently living in Vienna, but moving back to Belgrade this summer. I know my family lived well, and generally many older people from my surroundings describe that period as happy, not perfect, but good for global development at that time."

Ema: "What is your perception of Tito?"

Man 2: "Good politician."

Woman 1: "Such a statesman will never appear in history again. A man who knew how to balance between east and west. A man who knew how to lead the country to be free and to develop. A man who provided opportunities and freedom for people to develop and educate themselves. And the freedom of the country, that's something no one else had in the world. I liked the work actions the most, where people got to know each other, there are still marriages from those times. People remember, everyone who wants to be honest, regrets that time. Now, some will say, when we broke up and created 6 states, that everyone wants their own country, I wish everyone well in life, but the rule of Josip Broz for me was something special, because something nice always happened. There was a lot of joy. I don't think such a statesman will ever appear."

Woman 2: "You said it nicely. Tito was a leader we sang to, as children we played in cultural events organized in his honor, today I am synonymous with carefree childhood and freedom of movement provided by the passport from his time. I respect his political skill and the idea of organizing the Non-Aligned Movement."

Man 3: "In short, Tito was the leader of the revolution in the former SFRJ area during the Great War, which he carried out and then continued to be its leader until his death. I deliberately say leader, regardless of his titles, because by all characteristics of his rule, he was undoubtedly a dictator, who actively and successfully built his cult of personality, not only in the country but also abroad through the Non-Aligned Movement. His personality and deeds are complex. He did create a state in which probably the best life was lived in these areas looking at historical frameworks. However, the greatest 'price' for creating that state was paid by the Serbs, who also paid the highest 'price' during the collapse of the state, because he did not build a sustainable state after his death. In this regard, I must emphasize that his guilt is not the only one, but Serbian political leaders also bear responsibility for the wrong management both in pre-war and post-war Yugoslavia."

Woman 3: "Tito is a world manipulator, an excellent politician, he managed to keep together the wild Balkan tribes, a foreign agent who was inserted and led the SFRJ."

Man 1: "Tito knew how to carry the entire nation and a great task, he was a brilliant politician."

Ema: "How do you see the political climate during Yugoslavia and Tito's time, maybe even with a comparison to today's Serbia? And how the same is said about Tito that he was a dictator, but from your story, that doesn't sound like it to me. I've read a lot about how people were sent to Goli Otok if they didn't agree with Tito."

Man 2: "Autocratic regime, different opinion and criticism are not allowed, you're punished for that."

Woman 1: "There's a saying in our language: 'Where there are no cats, mice lead the dance', which means, where there's no authority, anyone can do whatever they want. He firmly held the reins in his hands, but there was less, everyone will try in their own way to manipulate people. So, the only thing, those people who opposed him, he sent them to Goli Otok, that's my only criticism, but nothing in life happens without a reason. Everything is done for a reason. Personally, I never felt any anxiety or anything bad, quite the opposite, there are many songs, many important events. The state planned for 5, 10 years, records were kept, there was no stealing like today. In Serbia today, it reminds me today with its construction and development, what President Vučić is doing, of Josip Broz, how he built Yugoslavia. And then there were jealous ones, as there are today, especially today, because I think it's very easy to manipulate with small countries. Every nation deserves to dictate its system in its own country as it suits, but since there are great powers ruling the world, they don't like that. I think that's why there's lying, quarreling, instigation. Humiliating Serbia is not nice, but it happens."

Woman 2: "For me, the political climate during Tito's time was carefree for the inhabitants who belonged to the party and minded their own business. Whoever wanted to work had a job, whoever wanted to educate themselves was successful in that, and could study for free. Goli Otok was relevant for individuals who were politically undesirable and against the regime and Tito. There is a similarity between Tito's and the current regime in terms of finding a job (it is necessary to be in the party to get a job in the state sector)."

Woman 3: "A strict dictatorial regime of Tito that did not allow anyone to stand in his way, proclaimed marshal, he decimated all opposing supporters of the Stalinist regime. Goli Otok is the precursor to Guantanamo, a camp for dissenters of Tito's regime who were aligned with the Russian regime."

Man 1: "A state that was badly hit during World War II, was quite rebuilt, but the totalitarian regime was indisputable. Goli Otok as another proof that Serbs fared the worst during Yugoslavia."

Man 3: "During Tito's time, there was a one-party system, which means there was no democracy. Nevertheless, in many spheres, it was precisely the citizens who, through their representatives, made decisions that were good for the same citizens. Today, there is a semblance of a multi-party system and democracy, all decisions are made by the ruling party. Goli Otok was the strictest prison for political dissenters into which people were incarcerated based on 'fabricated' criminal proceedings."

Ema: "What is your view of Vučić? What kind of Politician is he?"

Woman 2: "I don't like his rhetoric. It's good that he provides us with a stable economy. It seems to me that the world accepts him as the leader of the nation."

Man 3: "Aleksandar Vučić, as the leader of the ruling party, outside constitutional and legal frameworks, regardless of the current function of the president of the state, is a new dictator who bases power on a party apparatus that gives him unconditional support for personal gain. However, his rule does not have entirely negative effects, because through cooperation with states outside the EU and the USA, he has achieved benefits for Serbia that would not otherwise be realized."

Woman 1: "I don't like the word Dictator, but many call him that. For me, that's someone who doesn't give people freedom if they don't have the basic things to live. But that was not Tito for me, nor is it Vučić now. That was Mussolini, Hitler, but not Vučić. It's a very harsh word, and they use it today as if it's a seasoning in every soup. But let other countries that have had colonies for years ask themselves what their democracy is like?"

Woman 3: "You are very right, we tend to forget how bad other countries have it, and still call themselves democracies. However, Vučić is a politician with 30 years of experience in politics, without experience in the economy, a great manipulator, very small in front of foreign politicians, and great in front of uneducated people in Serbia."

Man 2: "Incredibly excellent politician, terrible statesman."

Man 1: "Inevitably, Vučić is an excellent politician, a leader of the lost, uneducated, and powerless people. In that regard, inevitably, someone like that can be at the top of the state, with such a people, and it suits him perfectly."

Ema: "What is he to you?"

Woman 1: "I personally perceive him, considering that for me, Serbia is one of the freest countries, why, because all nationalities have their schools in their languages, they have an hour or two, depending on the schedule, their own television, they have their cultural centers, their free customs, they have their temples, as a good leader. I see little where in the West each has their own church. Serbia welcomed everyone. For me, Vučić is a patriot, not a nationalist, he loves his people. Let the whole world ask themselves, how many scientists the Serbian people have contributed to this civilization, from Nikola Tesla, Mihailo Pupin, Milutin Milanković, Mileva Marić, Einstein's wife, and never attacked anyone, but always defended itself. Therefore, I am sorry that my great country fell apart, now we are all divided."

Man 2: "A lackey!"

Woman 2: "He's a typical politician to me."

Woman 3: "Vučić is a man who is not interested in Serbia or the Serbian people, but is interested in power and status."

Man 3: "Colonial governor."

Man 1: "To me, Vučić is a mirror of our decades-long misery, of what is behind us, bad choices, eternal theft and corruption, and of what is yet to come, because even generations that have not yet been born will pay off those debts into which the radical political lineup drags us."

Ema: "What do you think, how much has Tito's legacy influenced the shaping of present-day Serbia?"

Woman 3: "Tito had a very negative impact on the development of Serbia compared to the whole of Yugoslavia because only Serbia had two provinces, which led to a recession and the tearing apart of Kosovo, because he himself staged it to happen. If we had been a united republic, it would have been very difficult to happen."

Woman 2: "Is that Tito's legacy, or were we simply not ready for self-management. I think there is not much of Tito's legacy in today's Serbia. But I can admit, no one came out happy from this war."

Man 1: "Because of Tito, Serbia was already stagnating, due to a series of bad decisions, deliberate or unintentional."

Woman 1: "Opinions are divided. Some will say that Tito greatly damaged the Serbian people because he dispersed them throughout Yugoslavia, and others will say that it was necessary for the country to develop, the same everywhere. I blame Tito for nothing. I think that every country, after a war, it is very difficult to find the right person who would build and create their country. Before Vučić, we had presidents who gave away Kosovo, handed over Kosovo, the heart of Serbia, from where the Orthodox temples originate, from presidents who apologized to everyone. But more or less politicians were no one like Vučić now, who understands his people. We all lost, no one gained anything from the collapse of our country. We are all in pain."

Man 2: "Terribly much, socialism and communism have destroyed the thinking of many."

Man 3: "Tito, as I have already mentioned, created a cult of personality. The same cult, as a 'proven model,' A. Vučić has also created."

Ema: "How much do you know about Aleksandar Vučić?"

Man 2: "A lot! In fact, way too much."

Man 3: "He was a young leader of the Serbian Radical Party, and after its split, he became the leader of the currently ruling Serbian Progressive Party. That's in a nutshell."

Woman 3: "His political career is associated with the statement 'we will kill 100 Muslims for one Serb,' and his ideological leader Šešelj said he would 'gouge out the eyes of Muslims with rusty spoons.' With such statements, young Vučić could understand nothing better about life than hating other people and nations, an autocrat, a dictator."

Woman 1: "I know he is a graduate lawyer, he joined the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj. He then developed with that party, and because everything intensified after the war, he, along with Tomislav Nikolić, founded today's Serbian Progressive Party, in which Muslims, Albanians, Bunjevci, Croats, Serbs, and everyone else, regardless of faith, are members because they aim for one goal, and that is for the country to develop. And he's simply a man who tolerates, and is terribly hardworking, which bothers many in the West, as I hear in the news and follow. He's not a campaigner, he doesn't respond to anyone. He has the same trait as Josip Broz, balancing between all people in the world but on his own terms, meaning on dignity and character. When he says something, he stands behind his word. So, it's no wonder that the Chinese president respects and values him so much, that he is respected among many presidents. People come to Serbia, they come to eat and shop, but if you ask them what they think about Serbia, they say the worst things about it."

Woman 2: "Now I've learned something from you too. I know he started his career back in the 90s conflict. I don't follow politics, and politicians are not interesting to me."

Man 1: "His political career has been paved for a long time, he is just one pawn among like-minded people and those who have long ensured the downfall of the state because they led both the powerful in power and the ordinary people who wanted to get rich and push their interests at any cost, even at the expense of others. In that sense, he is just a trained copy of many, and with the whole country and a system that is unwavering, he is all-powerful and his policy."

Ema: "A few pieces of information, and then I'd like your opinions on it: Do you know about the Freedom House Index? It's done every year, and measures how free a country is. Last year, the Freedom House Index calculated that Serbia is Partly Free and a hybrid Regime, as the elections are not conducted according to the rules and media freedom is suppressed. How do you see this?"

Woman 2: "I don't go to elections because I don't believe in them; media freedom is currently suppressed all over the planet."

Man 1: "It seems to me that anyone interested in Serbia and current events cannot find real and transparent information related to politics, elections, and so on. The level of corruption and cheating is, in my opinion, unimaginable for a country that is generally located on the European continent. And within the country, there is a high awareness among opponents of Vučić, but no initiative, there is no group that can lead these people. This partly happens because of massive fraud in elections, huge illusions regarding the media, which are very important in today's modern world. In Serbia, it is becoming impossible for the truth to emerge."

Man 2: "I know. Absolutely true, elections are not conducted according to the law, with pressure on many coerced voters, socially vulnerable, etc. The opposition is stifled on every issue."

Woman 1: "Why them specifically? Following their history, what freedom?"

Man 3: "It is true that elections are not conducted according to the rules and that media freedom is suppressed. However, in Serbia, there are media outlets that are exclusively pro-government and those that are exclusively oppositional. Through both, primarily information (often false and sweeping) is sent against the opposite side, objective journalism is a rare occurrence. I do not accept without reservations reports from any international organization, and when considering how much importance I give them, I particularly take into account who the founders are and how they are financed."

Woman 3: "The situation is getting worse and worse."

Ema: "Why were there protests in Serbia when Vučić was re-elected?"

Woman 2: "Because of irregularities during the elections, however it may have looked."

Woman 1: "Because non-governmental organizations, paid from the West, were to overthrow the government, as they do not want Serbia to prosper and advance. Jealousy, it's pure jealousy."

Man 1: "Because democracy does not exist in Serbia, dissatisfaction is enormous, due to media blackout and election fraud."

Man 2: "Because of the people's anger. All elections since 2012 have been rigged and stolen, some less, some more."

Man 3: "The protests were due to irregularities during the electoral process in the parliamentary and local elections in December 2023. However, A. Vučić was not 'elected' in those elections. At that time, he was the president of the country and formally just a member of the ruling party. A. Vučić ceased to be the president of the ruling party even before the elections, in May 2023. However, the prevailing opinion is that even after stepping down from his position in the party, he still controls it sovereignly."

Woman 3: "Because Serbia has a very small percentage of civic initiative, democratic part of the population who oppose radical Serbia. The protests stemmed from that, they were against radical Serbs who represent the majority."

Ema: "What do you think about the statement that it is possible that Vučić and his party are working with organized crime?"

Woman 2: "Every capital acts like organized crime when allowed."

Man 2: "True. He wouldn't have gained this much power if it weren't true."

Woman 1: "This is the first time I've heard of it. What kind of crime, he's smashed them everywhere. Today Đukanović said he's carrying out blood revenge, so what is that? It made me sick right away."

Man 1: "Unfortunately, as a young person with critical thinking, it is very easy to come across information directly linking Vučić to various criminal groups and a huge number of scandals."

Man 3: "I believe that there is organized crime in Serbia and that it is related to the ruling party."

Woman 3: "When a statesman is called the boss in all parameters of power and organizations, it only exists in two columns, the boss is called of the kitchen, or the boss of the mafia. It is very clear that Vučić, due to his complex, entered into being the boss of a criminal organization, mafia."

Ema: "Vučić was previously in the radical party, I'll show you a video, then you tell me what you think about it?"

Video: "The Ruler", political biography of Aleksandar Vučić, part one Minute 24:45 - 25:16

"Just ten days before the genocide against the Muslim population in Srebrenica, the youngest member of parliament will utter words that will mark him for life regardless of numerous transformations: 'You bomb, kill one Serb, we'll kill a hundred Muslims, let's see if the international community or anyone else dares to attack Serbian positions. Can one behave like this with the Serbian people.'"

Man 1: "I am ashamed, that this is our head of state. Vučić in his regular edition, dictator in the making, passionate and shameful statements."

Man 3: "Regarding the first video, I have exclusively negative comments because I do not support such 'war' policies anywhere in the world. However, he did not come up with it, and it does not reflect his originality. The same policy was implemented by the Germans during World War II in Serbia. If you haven't, read the poem 'Bloody Fairy Tale' by Desanka Maksimović. The same policy is now being implemented by the USA and Israel."

Woman 1: "Jesus! Do you know whose statement that was when he said that? Well, you see, that's the narrative of the Germans, as he told you already, for one German killed, they killed a hundred Serbs, that's their narrative he took. I'm not saying he should have said that, but he apologized for such words, there are terrible times in every political career. Everyone spins things their own way, why not release the recordings from the beginning, instead of taking parts as they please? Why did he say it like that, it's a media war, a double-edged sword."

Woman 2: "I don't agree. A serious politician should never utter such words, but this politician most often utters a bunch of pointless and meaningless threats, statements, opinions, comments, and more. What a shitshow!"

Woman 3: "Currently, there is a vote on the Srebrenica resolution, and as someone who is against him and his statements, I'm glad it's all coming to light."

Man 2: "Threatens, insults, but without real danger. No different than today. 100% populism."

Video: "The Ruler", political biography of Aleksandar Vučić, part one Minute 27:26 - 27:40

"And we neither then nor today, didn't want and won't want anything that is someone else's, we want only what is ours, Serbian, and that includes that Karlobag and Ogulin, Karlovac and Virovitica, and all those Serbian lands. And they must know that."

Woman 1: "That was Šešelj's idea, which he supported, because he didn't know any better. That was his (Šešelj's) desire for Greater Serbia. I'm not justifying him, that was the rhetoric of the radical party, the man left that party and founded this one. In every grain there are weeds, he has flaws too. What they are, I don't know. He apologized to everyone."

Man 1: "It's absurd to hear something like that when Kosovo was already starting to disappear from our map back then, let alone anything else."

Man 2: "Nationalism and Greater Serbia. 100% populism."

Woman 2: "I remember those statements from the 90s, he was on the fringe of the political scene back then. Talking nonsense."

Man 3: "Regarding the second video, I also have a negative comment because such policies are the cause of the suffering of primarily the Serbian and Croatian people during the war in the territory of the SFRY. However, it cannot be said that he is an exception and original even in regard to that statement. Currently, in the Republic of Croatia, which is part of the EU, the HDZ party is in power, whose leaders in that same period made similar statements. They were all making the same mistakes, some change, some don't. Most of them didn't."

Woman 3: "He didn't get what he mentioned, you want what's others', where is yours, where is Kosovo?"

Ema: "Would you vote for Vučić and Tito if there were a possibility again?"

Woman 1: "Yes and yes."

Man 3: "I wouldn't vote for either Vučić or Tito in the elections."

Man 2: "No."

Woman 2: "I didn't vote for either of them and I don't know when I'll vote again."

Woman 3: "I would choose Tito over Vučić, never Vučić."

Man 1: "I agree. Tito over Vučić, true."

Ema: "Would you say that someone who is at the same time for Tito and for Vučić, who are still different in their politics, would that be called a Paradox?"

Woman 2: "No, both of them developed something like a cult of personality. Such behavior instills trust in the strength of leadership in many voters."

Man 1: "Based on various stories and confirmations, although Tito's regime was quite restrictive, I can confirm that it is almost impossible to live worse than at the present moment, when Vučić has been ruling for a long time and it's only getting worse. That is indeed a paradox."

Woman 3: "That is a paradox, during Tito's time life was good even though it was a semi-dictatorship, and during Vučić's time life is catastrophically bad."

Woman 1: "Serbia is 'multicultural,' they may have been different in rhetoric when he was in the radical party, but I see many similarities between them, Vučić also connects, builds railways, roads, to ensure fast flow of people and capital. But he is human to me, humane, if a person improves for the better, if results are visible, and progress is seen, that is a natural process. He made mistakes back then, but now he's better."

Man 2: "No, I agree with woman 2, also both are dictators, autocrats, and leaders. Balkan people mostly prefer a 'firm hand,' so that is 'normal.'"

Man 3: "It's not a 'complete' paradox. Parties whose politics are based on the will of one person who builds a cult of personality are in power because of those people and not because of the proclaimed party policy. If the leader convinces citizens that he knows best and that there is no one better than him, then all his actions are justified. It therefore does not matter what ideology they support, if they know how to work the crowd, they will be powerful. Still, it is paradoxical to vote for them both, if it would be possible, as their governing styles just wouldn't be going hand in hand."

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