From Brussels to Belgrade: Challenges in Conducting Research and Constructing Explanations of the Collapse of Yugoslavia

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Abstract

While acknowledging that it is important to examine events within their appropriate context, this article is interested in the capacity of qualitative research methods to assist us so that we can get a more accurate picture of European Community involvement in the Yugoslav federation and the decisions that terminated its existence. More precisely, the article is concerned with the extent to which archival collections and interviews with state as well as nonstate actors can shape our ideas and consequent explanations of the Yugoslav state crisis. In addition, the last section elaborates on a number of challenges one may encounter while being on such a demanding research journey. As suggested by the concluding remarks, new interpretations, apart from managing to satisfy the researcher's own ambition to complement the existing scholarship, should also serve to encourage fresh questions and answers.

Purpose of the Study

This article examines the relevance and capacity of archives and interviews to complement or even question the existing research and explanations of the collapse of Yugoslavia, many of which have failed to point out and try to address challenges one may encounter while investigating such an important case. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) ceased to exist on January 15, 1992, when the then European Community (EC) and its Member States decided to recognize the republics of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states. Since then, numerous scholars and nonscholars alike have tried to offer authoritative interpretations of the country's crisis and consequent breakup, outlining what really went wrong and what lessons could be learnt. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that the Yugoslav case is of great interest to some other states, in Europe and elsewhere. Accordingly, my research has focused on the lack of strong and stable relations between the EC and Yugoslavia—an aspect that gained its full significance during the Yugoslav state crisis, providing various state and nonstate actors with an opportunity to affect policy-making processes at the EC level (Radeljić, 2012). This is why an interdisciplinary approach combining history and political science is adopted. The importance of the historical component is that it "attempts to integrate all available information on the historical background and the original sources in which discursive events are embedded" (Wodak, 2002, p. 149), while the political science component analyzes problems and outcomes relevant for particular, local, national, or global communities (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 84–85). Therefore, the value of the interdisciplinary approach lies in its capacity to demonstrate that the nature of relations existing between the EC and Yugoslavia in the 1970s and, even more importantly, during the 1980s, contributed to the outcome (the collapse of the Yugoslav state), which was a political decision carried out by the Brussels administration.

In order to provide an in-depth analysis, it is necessary to try to apply the most appropriate research methodology. As one author suggests:

[m]ethods must be appropriate to the nature of the object we study and the purpose and expectations of our inquiry, though

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the relationships between them are sometimes slack rather than tight. If we imagine a triangle whose corners are method, object and purpose, each corner needs to be considered in relation to the other two. (Sayer, 1992, p. 4)

When we apply this advice to the EC-SFRY case, it is the qualitative approach—which largely relies on the use of both archival material (of the archives of European Union [EU] institutions and various former-Yugoslav archives) and interviews conducted with state actors such as policy makers who acted on behalf of their governments as well as nonstate actors such as diaspora communities, media representatives, and clergy members—that is likely to deal with the interdependence among the corners of the triangle most adequately and generate new explanations and scholarship. In fact, the vast majority of scholarly analyses of the collapse of Yugoslavia have clearly supported the relevance of the qualitative research method which

comes from a particular 'model of man' which sees human beings not as organisms responding … to some external stimulus, nor inexorably driven by internal needs and instincts, nor as 'cultural dopes', but as persons, who construct the meaning and significance of their realities. (Jones, 1985, pp. 45–46).

While the Yugoslav federation no longer exists and some of the actions perpetrated have become well known, it is possible to argue that EU involvement in the Yugoslav space has been rather controversial, generating various dilemmas not only with regard to the overall performance of the EU but also with regard to its individual Member States and nonstate actors who were in charge of important roles in the dealing with the Yugoslav crisis and policy-making processes. The article is divided into three sections: First Section will look into the significance of archival material, second section will discuss the power and reliability of interviews, and, finally, third section will elaborate on a number of challenges and possible solutions, researchers might find insightful.

Opting for Archives

In his study, political theorist Irving Velody maintains that "as the backdrop to all scholarly research stands the archive. Appeals to ultimate truth, adequacy and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions" (Velody, 1998, p. 1). In fact, another scholar, who also marvels at the exclusive character of archives, writes that

[p]erhaps the most striking difference between book collections and archival collections of textual materials is that a large proportion of archival documents, other than duplicative government records, are unique and not amenable to cooperative selection and microfilming projects in the same manner as brittle books. (Battin, 1990, p. 189)

Therefore, thanks to archival institutions and their collections that we continue to learn more about the past and then link the

findings to the present and, subject to the aims of the research conducted, try to predict the future. Government archives are the case in point: While keeping records of the government's meetings, discussions, and adopted policies, they are perceived as sources of trustworthy information and knowledge that can confirm the previously made and promoted arguments or, in fact, help us to challenge them. With this in mind, we can agree that a good piece of research in history or political science is not quite complete (or even credible enough) if archives relevant for the selected topic are not considered and fully explored. Such a perception is often inspired by the fact that the post-Second World War period has witnessed the establishment of new archives (both national and international) and intensification of archival cooperation (Evans, 1987; Franz, 1992; Rothschild, 2008).

Relevant Archives

The archives of EU institutions, instituted after the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community in the 1950s, keep records of all sorts of meetings, discussions, and adopted policies. With regard to the EC–Yugoslav relations in the period from 1968 (when the official relations between the two parties were established) to 1992 (when the Yugoslav federation ceased to exist), the archives of EU institutions provide valuable collections of primary sources focusing first on economic and then political aspects. For example, as demonstrated elsewhere, by the end of the 1970s, some fierce debates over Yugoslavia had become a frequent feature within the European Parliament and then, during the 1980s, numerous meetings, powerful statements, and disputable promises served to bring both parties' authorities together in order to test their readiness to cooperate (Radeljić, 2012, pp. 68–92). Often mistakenly, the emphasis was on financial assistance, which was understood as the only prerequisite for Yugoslavia's stability and progress no matter the field and, accordingly, the Community agreed to continue to support its Mediterranean partner financially, while political cooperation was almost completely ignored.

In Yugoslavia, the outbreak of the state crisis generated an uneasy period in the life of local archives and, more relevantly, their collections. As soon as some of the archives in Croatia had been affected by the war, Josip Kolanović, the then director of the Archives of Croatia in Zagreb, sent a letter to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization underlining that "[t]he sources kept in the Croatian archives are of extreme importance for history not only of Croatia, but of the Balkans as well as of the Mediterranean world" and asking for "professional and all possible help to protect the archival treasure" (Kolanović as cited in Ficović, 1992, p. 227). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to the city of Mostar, where the establishment hosting archival collections "was literally levelled by the Croat paramilitaries in 1993" (Banac, 1999, p. 218), various other archives and often their collections were also heavily damaged by the conflicting parties (Sarić, 1999). To complicate the situation further, following the official demise of the Yugoslav federation, the question of division

of archival material emerged, requiring rapid solutions. As followed, in October 1997, directors of the state archives of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia met in the Archives of Yugoslavia in Belgrade to discuss the matter, agreeing to respect archival theory and international principles. They agreed on the following:

> 1. All the citizens of successor states of Yugoslavia would have access to archival material at the same conditions, based on the Law and other archival regulations. In respect of the access of the archival material for the needs of successor states the procedure terms could be shorter from those established in the Law; 2. In respect of archival material of former Yugoslavia the basic archival principle of provenance should be respected; 3. Respecting the principles of provenance and archival integrity, in accordance with principle of functional pertinence, we could, as an exception, discuss the question of original documents or groups of documents, relating to successor states and their work; 4. It is necessary, as soon as possible, to elaborate the archival review of record groups or fonds, and of the creators of archival material of federation, without any regard of the place where they are kept; 5. The solution of the problem of the state archives of former Yugoslavia could be accelerated if it would be taken out from other items of succession, and elaboration of the proposal of the solution would be confided to the state archives, on the basis of international archival practice and principles. (Pandžić, 1999, p. 249)

As subsequently concluded by Jovan Popović, the then Head of the Archives of Yugoslavia, dividing archival material characterizing Yugoslavia's history equals "cultural genocide"—a pretention that is without any grounding in archival theory and practice (Popović, 2000, p. 148). Still, in this battle, Croatia has claimed to be entitled to the greatest part of the archival documents, followed by the republics of Macedonia and Slovenia.

No matter whether division of archival materials related to the existence of the First (1918–1941), Second (1945–1992), or Third Yugoslavia (1992–2003) will ever satisfy everybody's expectations, the archives in present-day Croatia and Serbia are the ones that are rather challenging to approach and explore their material. An attempt to get access and explore material in the Croatian State Archive remained just an attempt, rather than an accomplished act. Although advised by various colleagues and interviewees to visit the archive in Zagreb, in a brief e-mail dated February 15, 2008, a member of staff informed me that the archive did not actually possess anything relevant for any aspect of my research. In Serbia, in rather contrast to the Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which inherited the relevant diplomatic material after the collapse of Yugoslavia and now offers a number of quite useful records, the Archive of Yugoslavia represented an endless hassle and this was mainly due to the poor classification of the documents. For example, one of the folders about European affairs, while containing some details about various meetings between European and Yugoslav officials, at one point offered material about trade agreements between Cuba and the SFRY.

Still, irregularities of this kind seem minor when compared to the fact that some folders that might have complemented my research were destroyed during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999.

Archival Documents

With regard to the selection of documents to be used, one needs to keep in mind various aspects. As correctly suggested in the literature,

> [t]he archival record doesn't just happen; it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral … Archival work is critical in shaping history. (Kaplan, 2000, p. 147)

The documents are even more powerful if we think of the generally accepted idea that history should help us to understand the present and hopefully prepare us for future scenarios. For example, government archives, by gathering records that can be used as evidence, "can force leaders and institutions to be accountable for their actions" (Hirtle, 2000). Alongside this understanding, archives are expected to be impartial contributors. However, as correctly pointed out by Luciana Duranti, although impartiality makes archives "the most reliable source for both law and history, whose purposes are to rule and explain the conduct of society by establishing the truth," we should be aware of the difference between impartiality of documents and their creators who are actually likely to be partial:

> Impartiality is a characteristic of archival documents, not of their creators, who are naturally partial to their own interests. To protect the impartiality of archives is to protect their capacity to reveal the biases and idiosyncracies of their creators. This is why it is so difficult to guarantee the appropriate maintenance of current and semicurrent documents by their creators, be they organizations or individuals: it cannot be done without alerting them to their documents inherent value but, if creators are made too vividly aware of the power of their documents, they may begin to draw or alter them for the benefit of posterity, and the documents would not be the un-self-conscious residue of action but a conscious reflection on it. (Duranti, 1994, pp. 334–335)

Thus, the above presented endeavor shows that working with archives can be a rewarding as well as a challenging experience. Luckily, at one point, some of the here referred to documents were collected and published in different edited volumes (Trifunovska, 1994, 1999). In addition, various diaspora organizations, media agencies, and religious organizations—three nonstate actors who were extremely active during the Yugoslav state crisis—store diverse relevant material as well. In this respect, the Slovenes seem to be well ahead as they decided to make public whichever material they found: For example, various volumes of their *Viri o demokratizaciji in osamosvojiti Slovenije [Sources about Democratization and Attainment of Independence of Slovenia]* represent a valuable

collection of official correspondence and transcripts related to the collapse of Yugoslavia. In the meantime, some media agencies have also made their archives available online—another advantage concerning time management. With regard to churches, although they have still remained rather difficult to approach in order to discover what kind of contacts their representatives cultivated, I relied on some of my old contacts (established via family members and friends) and managed to connect with different people and collect information that proved of significant use.

Planning and Conducting Interviews

Research interviews represent another source one can decide to use hoping to gain some relevant data and crystallize ideas, so that the final information will be as accurate and detailed as possible. As we have read so far, the methodological soundness of interviews has been exposed to some serious criticism and this is especially relevant in cases when the whole research is imagined to heavily rely on them (Connolly, 1992; Hammersley, 2006; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). For example, the position of interviewees (whether they are genuine or not) and the importance of the context in which a particular interview takes place (in times of the Yugoslav state crisis when some policies did not exist or, even worse, could never be imagined, or later when they actually came into being) can affect the overall quality of conducted research and generate misleading knowledge. In his detailed study about credibility, Joseph Maxwell (1992, 2013) talks about five categories that can assist us in judging the overall validity of qualitative research: descriptive validity (concerned with the factual accuracy of the data), interpretive validity (being predominantly about the researcher's own capacity to interpret the participants' statements and understandings of the research-relevant events), theoretical validity (focused on the researcher's ability to provide precise explanations, while well aware of the existing concepts within a particular context), generalizability (which should make the findings and conclusions important for other contexts), and evaluative validity (interested in the evaluations offered by the researchers).

With all these risks in mind, some interviewees could still provide relevant data. First, there is always something new to be said about the European response to the outbreak of the Yugoslav state crisis and consequent policies, as proved by most of the interviewees, especially off the record. Second, most of the actors directly involved in the Yugoslav crisis have their own understanding of the events and therefore encourage new perspectives and raise fresh questions requiring fresh answers. Finally, some of the informants consulted never left written documentation of the issues they are familiar with and can thus be seen as useful sources of relevant knowledge valuable to the research conducted that would otherwise remain unexplored. In fact, interviews assist researchers with what some authors call "flexibility of mind," necessary "to overturn old ways of looking at the world, to ask new questions, to revise research designs appropriately, and then to collect more data of

a different type than originally intended" (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 12).

Interview Structure

Thinking about different structures, I rarely opted for structured interviews. As defined by Isadore Newman and Keith McNeil "[t]he structured interview consists of an interviewer reading the questions, possible answers, and recording the answers. This type of interview is most appropriate when one is not interested in attitudes or personal feelings" (Newman & McNeil, 1998, p. 27). Thus, due to its highly formal and rather quick nature, this way of gaining information can easily become least interesting and useful. In fact, structured interviews are only suitable when the respondents do not have enough time for semi- or unstructured interviews. Apart from being very short in nature, structured interviews run the risk of influencing respondents' answers.

Semi-structured or guided interviews proved to be the ones to appreciate most. These interviews included a set of questions created in advance which were however sufficiently flexible that the additional questions could arise and complement the original ones. As argued by one author, semi-structured interviews

> are ones where research and planning produce a session in which most of the informant's responses can't be predicted in advance and where you as interviewer therefore have to *improvise* probably half—and maybe 80 percent or more—of your responses to what they say in response to your *initial prepared* question or questions. (Wengraf, 2001, p. 5)

In fact, this approach seems to be a good way to collect relevant and, at the same time, detailed information. Given the complexity of EC involvement in the Yugoslav state crisis, detailed data and information are imperative for understanding and explaining the rationale behind policy-making processes. According to Sue Jones,

> [i]n order to understand why persons act as they do we need to understand the meaning and significance they give to their actions. The in-depth interview is one way—not the only way and often used most appropriately in conjunction with other ways—of doing so. (Jones, 1985, p. 46)

With regard to obtaining relevant information, Jones suggests that in order

> to understand other persons' constructions of reality we would do well to ask them … in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meaning. (Jones, 1985, p. 46)

In addition, having a similar set of questions and repeating them to different respondents is another necessity, as this facilitates the comparison of the answers and identification of the

most appropriate ones. Thus, apart from being a mode to gain information, the semi-structured interviews proved to be the most appropriate way to measure validity. As correctly observed elsewhere,

> [t]he interview is one part, and a crucial one, in the measurement process as it is conducted in much of social research. As such the use of the interview is subject to the laws of measurement; it can be properly judged by the standards of measurement, and it suffers from the limitations of all measurement processes in degrees peculiar to itself. (Cannell & Kahn, 1968, p. 530)

Finally, I unwillingly conducted a small number of highly unstructured interviews. Various authors argue that the effectiveness of these interviews "is totally dependent on the skill and training of the interviewer" (Newman & McNeil, 1998, p. 28). This is true; some of my respondents, although expressing interest in the topic and beginning to answer my questions, very soon decided to talk about completely irrelevant issues such as the EU's Common Agricultural Policy or the Yugoslav taxation system, none of which had anything to do with the role of the EC in the Yugoslav state crisis. This means that for the sake of being polite, the researcher could easily end up discussing issues he or she hardly knows anything about instead of trying to retrieve relevant information.

Right Respondents

The interviewees (44 in total) were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: their direct involvement in the events and policy-making processes both within the EC and the Yugoslav federation; their indirect involvement as government officials, diplomats, advisors, academics, journalists, and clergy members, or their extensive writings that sometimes ended up published as memoires. Approaching such individuals means that sometimes they would talk about their personal experiences in their own name, whereas sometimes they would represent their respective associations, institutions, and organizations. A few respondents wanted their names to remain anonymous during and after the research process and this was respected. Interestingly, some other respondents wanted to know who had already been approached and who was next. Questions such as "Have you spoken about *this* with somebody else?" and "I hope I managed to help you. Who will you be talking to next?" were occasionally heard, but here, even if the previous interviewees did not mind having their names mentioned to the later ones, I maintained my personal right to decide whether to reveal any information. More precisely, the names were not disclosed as soon as there was a slight impression that the decision to reveal them could affect the overall quality of the conversation and, on the contrary, they were revealed when believing that they were not going to affect the interview in a negative way. Of course, this was not always so straightforward; for example, on a few occasions I was asked "Why do you want to talk to me if you have already talked to

her/him?"—a question that required a well-framed diplomatic answer, if conducting an interview was still an option.

Policy makers offered a wider insight into what was really going on in the crucial moments determining Yugoslavia's future. They contributed to my understanding of the relations between the EC and the Yugoslav federation as well as what importance the nonstate actors played in shaping the Community's decisions to recognize Slovenia and Croatia as independent states. Luckily, most of them were still alive, often retired, and willing to take part in semi-structured interviews that gave them greater freedom to answer questions as they thought was best, rather than being constrained within a set of predefined "closed" questions. Accordingly, in order to gain higher quality information and crystallize their standpoint, they were asked some unconventional and puzzling questions: If both the EC and the SFRY lived very different lives (often due to Cold War dynamics), what was the crucial point that brought them closer and how did the things change after that point? What were the main issues discussed by the respective representatives? Did the nonstate actors take part in the Yugoslav state crisis due to the obvious lack of the Community's policy or was it even before the crisis that they started lobbying for independence of Slovenia and Croatia? What contacts were established and how were they cultivated? Where did the main support (financial and moral) come from? The same method was applied to all the informants, irrespective of their background, or the group they belonged to.

Diplomats were rather enthusiastic to take a look back and reassess some of the standpoints particular policy makers had adopted and promoted as most appropriate at the time. One diplomat representing one of the Yugoslav republics and now an independent state even started crying while describing the incredible lack of knowledge that existed among Western policy makers—a problem already discussed in some previously published studies. For example, Viktor Meier writes that he

> had never before encountered such a colossal jumble of political error, lazy thinking, and superficiality as [he] encountered then among the Western diplomatic corps in Belgrade …, most of whom went beyond the city limits of the capital only with great reluctance. (Meier, 1999, p. 217)

Further on, it is surprising to hear the amount of criticism that still dominates discourses about certain decisions taken with regard to the Yugoslav federation. Most of the diplomats representing former Yugoslav republics—now states—offered absurdly opposing interpretations about the crisis, leaders, and consequent wars. As a result, it was possible to hear the worst and the best about the Slovenes, the Serbian and Croatian leaderships, the Germans, and so on. Such a variety of opinions, although initially perceived as something extremely interesting and beneficial, at one point turned into something equally frustrating. In this case, repeating the same questions to different respondents was not enough; what did help was to introduce some of the questions by saying what some other participants had already pointed out, usually something controversial.

Without spelling out their names and being persuasive, I chose to use previously collected opinions in order to collect new ones and, more importantly, identify the most appropriate answers. However, what quite some diplomats agreed upon was that the diplomacy was rather weak during the state crisis and that diplomatic efforts served to fulfill the basic idea that diplomacy did exist, rather than being capable of reinforcing the crisis settlement.

Various other interviewees such as diaspora representatives, journalists, and clergy members contributed by telling stories they considered relevant for this type of research. Talking about diaspora funding and greater involvement during the crisis clarified the idea as to how home governments (Slovenian and, to a lesser extent, Croatian) and diaspora groups strengthened their links and worked toward their final goal—independence. Media experts identified major themes that propaganda relied on and elaborated on uses and abuses of media power. Here, although I largely benefited from the existing media materials in various media agencies, the interviews primarily managed to convince me how cautious any researcher has to be when selecting media sources due to their biased and often erroneous reporting. For example, without trying to understand the essence of the problem, the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* attributed pro-European values to the republics of Slovenia and Croatia, in contrast to their treatment of Serbia. From a completely different perspective, the major Serbian newspapers—*Politika* and *Večernje novosti*—insisted on the victimization of the Serbs without considering their own ever-increasing involvement and responsibility for crimes committed outside the Republic of Serbia. Clergy members talked about religious aspects that preceded and characterized the Yugoslav state crisis. In this respect, lengthy discussions about the shift of the Vatican's policy from initially supporting the unity of Yugoslavia to supporting its disaggregation were of great use.

Finally, but perhaps equally importantly, academics were approached. Jürgen Habermas (2009, p. 52) sees an intellectual as someone who "seeks out important issues, proposes fruitful hypotheses, and broadens the spectrum of relevant arguments in an attempt to improve the lamentable level of public debates." Intellectuals often provide fresh questions and encourage further thinking about the issues one tries to examine. Very often, while perceiving them as the ones who possess the ultimate knowledge due to the endless research they have committed themselves to, I used every opportunity to ask questions that had already been asked elsewhere and get a better chance of identifying a truthful answer. Sometimes the "new" answers fully confirmed the already obtained ones, sometimes not. Many academics were occupying reputable positions even before the Yugoslav crisis and its outbreak was an opportunity to apply for various research projects aimed at establishing what really went wrong with Yugoslavia; however, depending on who the funding bodies were, the advertized calls for projects were often supposed to serve some agenda (departmental or institutional), meaning to support one side or the other, without sincerely questioning the very nature of the Yugoslav

state crisis and respective responsibilities. This, of course, resulted in the polarization of academic scholarship and consequent labeling of academics as being almost exclusively pro-Western (including pro-Slovenian and Croatian) or pro-Serbian (often implying pro-Milošević). With this in mind, it was very important to be aware of the background, research profile, and public engagement of academics to be approached, as to what their point of view was like before the outbreak of the crisis, how it evolved, and which direction it took during and immediately after the crisis. Accordingly, some academics never abandoned (or wanted to compromise) their originally adopted viewpoint, whereas some others occasionally changed their position, resulting in the appreciation of actors they previously criticized or vice versa.

Challenges and Possible Solutions

The previous two sections have outlined some of the practical challenges encountered while conducting research on the relations between the EC and Yugoslavia and the consequent European involvement in the Yugoslav state crisis and the role of nonstate actors. Being granted access to one archive rather than the other is not a big problem as long as relevant official documents are found and properly acknowledged. In this respect, it is important to note that the archives of the EU institutions (given the supranational dimension of the EU itself) are remarkably well coordinated, meaning that documents originally produced in one institution are often copied and stored in other institutions. By contrast, the post-Yugoslav space has been characterized by disputes over the right to archival material.

More worryingly for the construction of examination of EC-SFRY relations, while comparing the documents stored in the archives of EU institutions and the present Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, it becomes apparent that there is a significant difference between the two sites with regard to the documents they store. While it is evident that the EC and the SFRY produced their own documents, they also often translated and stored each other's documents talking about the relations between them (unless marked top secret), the two however carefully selected which material they wanted to translate and make available in their depositories. As it happened to be the case, the Community tended to avoid translating documents and debates in which the Yugoslav authorities criticized it for what they viewed as discriminatory policies, limiting Yugoslavia's access to the European market. Still, much more dramatically, the Yugoslav leadership exercised its power to review and decide not to translate and store almost anything that criticized it for the country's overall mismanagement, including economic performance, political issues, and societal problems (Radeljić, 2015). The decision to ignore numerous sources of crucial political relevance is a very good illustration of the existence of an undeniable link between archives and politics. For example, European Parliament debates about the future of Yugoslavia after the death of President Josip Broz Tito was ignored and, in

fact, never translated. Similarly, some other debates, clearly outlining the European concerns and criticism directed toward the Yugoslav leadership for its mistreatment of the Kosovo Albanian population, were simply not dealt with by the Yugoslav authorities and archivists. With this in mind, any research about the relations between the EC-SFRY should be based on the documents found in the archives of EU institutions or, even better, in both sites, as the decision not to do so could easily generate misleading impressions and wrong knowledge.

With regard to the interviews, practical challenges were mostly related to the time and place of the meeting. The option to choose actually meant that apart from meeting the respondents in their offices, we occasionally met in nearby coffee shops or even McDonald's restaurants. Such meeting points are benign enough and thus unlikely to affect the quality of interview; interestingly, some of the most insightful interviews focusing on the European and Yugoslav elites occurred outside working environments, away from personal secretaries and assistants. After having realized that listening, observing, and writing down notes simultaneously was a rather difficult task, using a voice recorder proved to be a good idea. Twice, in Belgrade and London, the use of my Olympus gadget was not allowed: While in Belgrade, security provisions of the embassy that hosted the interview did not allow any kind of electronic device, in London, the respondent suggested to have a rather informal talk first and then meet again within couple of weeks when it would be possible to record the interview. Unfortunately, none of the attempts to get in touch with the respondent and to arrange for our second session was successful.

However, the main challenges encountered were ethical in nature. Ethical dilemmas and obligations to protect the rights of participants have gradually strengthened their position in the literature on qualitative research (Babbie, 1989; Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1991; Kvale, 1996; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Lipson, 1994; Neuman, 1997; Reynolds, 1982). Such contributions are especially relevant if we think that sometimes the very first stages of research are characterized by the sole objective of producing an original piece of scholarship, without paying much attention to the possible (and unforeseen) negative consequences. According to Juliene Lipson, the most common issues to bear in mind while conducting and presenting research are ''informed consent; deception or covert research; the researcher's responsibility to informants, sponsors and colleagues; risks versus benefits; and, to a lesser extent, reciprocity and intervention'' (Lipson, 1994, p. 343).

First and foremost, in order to avoid any sort of damage, none of the respondents should suffer harm (social, emotional or, more extremely, physical) as a consequence of taking part in (any) research. This means that identities and locations of participants should be presented in anonymized form and disclosed only upon their own consent. In the very beginning, I thought that my analysis was going to look like an incomplete piece of work if the individuals providing insightful comments and ideas were not clearly named. However, the more the interviewing part of the research process was advancing, the more it became obvious how sensitive for some of my respondents the

researched topic was. For example, some of them held important positions during the Yugoslav crisis and have managed to preserve them since then which meant that revealing their names could potentially harm them socially and, of course, emotionally. As they put it pragmatically, they were not keen on receiving court invitations to witness against various statesmen, directly involved in the Yugoslav wars. Still, when accepting to share their experience, they should be aware of Maurice Punch's observation that ''many institutions and public figures are almost impossible to disguise, and, if they cooperate in research, may have to accept a considerable measure of exposure, particularly if the popular media pick up on research'' (Punch, 1994, p. 92). Second, both background and temperament of the researcher can condition her or his position while conducting research. Given that the Slovenian and Croatian authorities, supported by various Western leaders, often insisted that the Serbian side was the only one culpable for the outbreak of the Yugoslav state crisis, it can be quite a challenge for researchers with Serbian background to approach the other side and obtain necessary information. With this in mind, it was useful to try to make clear that my understanding was significantly different from the one adopted by the Serbia's leading figures that resulted in a set of fatal policies and consequent international isolation. With regard to temperament, talking about politics and policy making can easily generate feelings ranging from anger to perplexity and amusement, but this is something to be reduced to an absolute minimum, as it can affect the quality of research.

The previous challenges can appear at any stage while dealing with the data. For example, John Seidel (1998) recognizes three compulsory aspects when approaching them: noticing, collecting, and thinking. Similarly, Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman, while noting that investigation, context, and interpretation are the greatest strengths of qualitative data, talk about seven phases: ''(a) organizing the data, (b) immersion in the data, (c) generating categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (f) searching for alternative understandings, and (g) writing the report or other format for presenting the study'' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156). It is usually much easier to explain various stages once the research process has fully terminated, by looking back and seeing retrospectively what occurred and when.

The noticing stage implies selecting and organizing the most relevant data out of the voluminous collection of documents and recorded interviews. More importantly, reduction of data helps crystallize already existing, but to some extent unclear, concepts. In his study on the use of documentary sources in social research, John Scott (1990) suggests to apply four criteria when considering a document: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. Documents released by the institutions of the EU as well as the ones released by the archives of the former Yugoslavia needed to satisfy the four criteria in order to avoid any misinterpretation about the events and policy-making processes. Further on, during the crucial moments determining the future of the Yugoslav federation,

the EU's institutions released various statements and therefore it is important to be capable of identifying the most accurate source and its position and relevance within the given political and social context. Scott's criteria can also be applied to interviews and this can explain why the content of some interviews is reduced by half or even by 95%. Still, this is not to indicate that some of the interviews were almost pointless, but that their content was already heard before and thus they were more relevant for the validity purposes or as a guidance for further research. With regard to the EC-SFRY relations and later European involvement in the Yugoslav crisis, some interviewees provided only partial information (intentionally or not) that could then easily be questioned or rejected as insufficient. This is where repeating the same set of questions to respondents coming from and supporting different sides (thus being pro-Slovenian and pro-Croatian or pro-Serbian) helps, as it facilitates the identification of the most appropriate, truthful, answers.

The collecting or sorting stage consists of allocation of data to different sections of the research in progress. By doing so, each section becomes work in progress on its own that will receive equal amount of attention and thus avoid the risk of being labeled as underresearched in comparison to some other sections. In my case, I opted for five sections, focusing on (1) the type of EC-SFRY cooperation before and after 1968, the year when official relations between the two were established; (2) the topics dominating official meetings and debates about the Yugoslav federation (economic, political, and social), and the response of individual EC Member States to the outbreak of Yugoslav crisis (what they said and how they changed their opinion from supporting the unity of Yugoslavia to supporting its dismemberment); (3) the involvement of diaspora communities (in terms of how they positioned themselves to act on behalf of their homeland and try to influence policy-making processes); (4) the reporting of the media (with a particular attention paid to the use of victimization propaganda and efforts to promote *the most accurate* coverage of what was happening and what should be done by the international community); and (5) the rhetoric of the Vatican and the Catholic clergy in general (as to how they offered support to the predominantly Catholic republics of Slovenia and Croatia). It is important to note that separating and coding the data can tell a lot about sequence of events and thus explain the final outcome—the collapse of the Yugoslav federation.

The thinking stage is about valuable statements that deserve proper acknowledgment and enough space in the final product. From comparing and contrasting various arguments to making sense and establishing relationships across the sections, it is the researcher's responsibility to develop and prove her or his ideas that accompany the overall theme of conducted research. In the context of doctoral studies, this stage is of crucial relevance, as it is supposed to convince the examiners that the conducted research makes a significant contribution to the literature. Even though many topics have already been examined in depth (and this is also true when thinking about the material discussing the collapse of Yugoslavia), it is the qualitative method that is

likely to offer a new niche and a completely new interpretation. More precisely, when Scott's four criteria (authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning) are combined with Charlotte Epstein's (2008) elaboration on the power of words in International Relations, it is possible to offer some fresh conclusions with regard to the EC-SFRY relations and the consequent mismanagement that cost Yugoslavia its existence.

The final challenge relates to the understanding and presence of bias. It has generally been argued that the researcher's personal views can easily affect almost any research in the social sciences. This is particularly obvious when talking about history and political science. As correctly observed by Robert Hayden,

> [a]cademic debates on the former Yugoslavia are as polarized as those surrounding the creation of Israel or the partitioning of Cyprus, with criticism of a study often depending more on whether the work supports the commentator's predetermined position than on the coherence of its theory or the reliability and sufficiency of its arguments. When one side in such a conflict wins politically, it usually also wins academically, because analyses that indicate that a politics that won is, in fact, wrong tend to be discounted. Political hegemony establishes intellectual orthodoxy. (Hayden, 1999, p. 19)

Still, as Sue Jones puts it, bias should not be perceived

> as something to be avoided at all costs but as something to be used, creatively, contingently and self-consciously. We use our 'bias' as human beings creatively and contingently to develop particular relationships with particular people so that they can tell us about their worlds and we can hear them. In doing this we use ourselves as research instruments to try and empathize with other human beings. (Jones, 1985, p. 48)

Thus, by looking at both Hayden's and Jones's understanding of bias, we can distinguish between two different types: while the first one relates to the analysis and publication of research, thus suggests to limit such influence and abandon personal political convictions as far as possible and present findings as unconditioned by any personal value judgments, the second suggests to use bias as a way of acquiring information from the sources that would otherwise be impossible to approach.

The above outlined challenges are inevitable when applying qualitative research methodologies. From the archival material to various interviewees and back, it is the researcher's role to try to obtain and balance the obtained information. Research that combines history and political science is characterized by various emotions, especially when it involves dealing with sensitive data and directly involved actors. With regard to European involvement in the Yugoslav state crisis, it is possible to argue that it is much easier to discuss the whole process from the present, with the benefit of hindsight afforded by the passing of two decades, and when some of the consequences have also become known. For example, as many documents and

participants revealed, not many EC officials believed that at the time when Slovenia and Croatia were recognized as independent states, in January 1992, the war was going to transfer to the neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, in April 1992. Today, taking a look back from a serene position makes more sense not only because it provides an opportunity for a more balanced interpretation of events and consequent decisions but also it help us to assess the lessons learned, hopefully useful for the future.

Conclusion

Travelling from Brussels to Belgrade via other European capitals in order to conduct qualitative research and produce original scholarship on Europe and the collapse of Yugoslavia is a challenge on its own. According to one author, "the task of research is to make sense of what we know" (Walker, 1991, p. 107). Indeed, we do know that the SFRY collapsed in 1992, but what researchers have tried to do since then is to offer explanations as to how the collapse came into being and why it was so violent. Understandably, the quality of explanations is often associated with the quality of conducted research conditioned by the relevance and sufficiency of arguments. As already indicated throughout the article, this does not mean that any enormous amount of research will necessarily generate conclusions of the utmost quality, but it is rather the quality of sources (primary as well as secondary) that is likely to do so. It is true that some archival sources which could possibly tell us more and complement research projects remain unavailable due to 30-year rules or even longer, but then, it is the researchers' own responsibility to find other relevant sources that will not question and discredit the quality of the published data.

Generally speaking, research in the social sciences is driven by an intellectual puzzle to comprehend a particular situation or outcome. When applied to the case examined here, the absence of stable relations between the then EC and the Yugoslav federation, and the Community's subsequent confusion over how to approach the outbreak of the Yugoslav crisis, contributed to the outcome: the collapse of the Southeast European state. In the context of minimized official efficiency, specific nonstate actors stepped in and contributed to the policy-making processes. Although the literature on the activism of nonstate actors during the Yugoslav crisis has been very limited, their role was of strategic significance. In fact, new explanations, apart from satisfying the researcher's own ambition to complement the ideas already existing in the field, should encourage new research and some fresh explanations and this brings us back to the initially mentioned relevance of qualitative methods for in-depth analyses.

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