

**Cultural Warfare: Balkanization, Turbo-Folk, and the Croatian Response to Serbian  
Nationalism**

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*Abstract*

Following the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980 Yugoslavia was faced with a series of political and social uprisings and challenges that lasted for nearly two decades. The struggle for independence as well as nationalistic movements transformed the Balkan region not just in its politics and the economy but also in its culture. With the rise of nationalism, the music industry of the Balkans took a new route and a new music genre emerged to be known as Turbo-Folk.

This research paper examines the rise of Turbo-Folk alongside Serbian nationalism, its impact on the culture and music of the region, and the Croatian response to Turbo-Folk and Serbian aggression and aims to offer a better understanding of this music genre's use during its political period and study the artistic aspects of the cultural movements that it caused across the Balkan region. Different primary sources of the Balkan region will be analyzed to offer a better understanding of how Turbo-folk was used as a cultural weapon in the war for Serbian hegemonic power as well as how the genre was expanded to other Balkan states such as Croatia and offer their stand and angle on this music phenomena. These sources will include music videos, lyrics, and different literary works of this music genre to better understand the cultural warfare of Balkan states and Southeastern Europe.

## **The Political Scene: Between Globalization and Fragmentation**

To better understand why Turbo-Folk was born one must understand the political scene of the Balkans during the late 1980s to 1990s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991, Yugoslavia was faced with the challenge of embracing free-market capitalism and economic globalization while maintaining a sense of national identity. What came after 1991 was a series of economic struggles. With the emergence of commercialized globalization, the struggling economy of Yugoslavia found it strenuous to compete with Western European free-markets but was also unsuccessful at establishing a centralized stable economic structure that would ensure a high quality of life for its citizens. With the rise of unemployment and never-ending economic recessions, the Balkan population did not see much future in the Socialist state and without a centralized government and a unifying figure such as Josip Tito, the preservation of the Yugoslavian identity became difficult.

This struggle for conservation was soon replaced with a sense of ethnic nationalism. Amidst the rising nationalist sentiments with the appointment of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia became the leading force to power vacuum the remaining of a fragmented Yugoslavia. During the Anti-bureaucratic Revolution (1986-1989) Milošević used the notion of "strong Serbia, strong Yugoslavia" to establish a Serbian political hegemony in the region. The movement was supported by Serbians and a minority of Macedonians but had completely alienated Bosnians, Croats, Kosovo Albanians, and Slovenes. In response to the Serbian aggression, Croatia, and Slovenia denounced the political actions of Milošević and started to demand that Yugoslavia be made into a multi-party confederal state. This did not sit well with Milošević and Serbian

nationalists that were keen to keep Serbia as the leading force of the Balkans. (Uroš Čvoro, p. 2, 62, and 136)

Croatia was the first to take action against the Serbian truculence. Franjo Tuđman rose to power within the Croatian political party as an opponent to Slobodan Milošević. The two Republics that were once united in their politics and agendas soon became hostile towards one another. While Serbia was adamant to hold its power, Croatians took military steps forward towards independence. (Mark Biondich)

When tensions were rising among different ethnic groups of the Balkans, Turbo-Folk became a popular device to advocate for Yugoslavian unity but with the growth in fragmentation, it was soon replaced with songs and tunes about Serbian nationalism.

### **Introduction to Turbo-Folk**

Turbo-Folk is a great mix of “electronic dance sounds, kitsch folk music with an oriental tone” (Rory Archer, p. 190). The genre was influenced by Yugoslav *novokomponovana narodna muzika* and was first emerged as a sub-genre of Pop-Folk. It includes elements of *Chalga*, which is often associated with Bulgarian folk music while containing Turkish elements that were left from the Ottoman rule. Although it weaponized to be nationalistic, the main function of Turbo-Folk was never meant to be offensive.

During the height of ethnic and political tensions, Turbo-Folk made its introduction to the music scene of Serbia and the rest of the Balkans. Misused as a nationalistic weapon, Turbo-Folk left an ever-lasting mark on the music scene of Serbia and beyond. The music genre is often associated with being “trash,” “banal,” “pornographic,” “(semi-)rural,” “oriental” and “Balkan” (Rory Archer, p. 178), however, studying the genre and judging it based on its time frame offers

a great perspective of the political and social ideologies of the Balkans during the peak of tension and warfare. Analyzing Turbo-Folk can also give a better understanding of Serbia's cultural war in the Balkans and how the genre came to be a popular weapon to attack other Republics of Yugoslavia.

While Turbo-Folk is associated with being traditional and right-wing, the fast spread of it across the Balkan states can also serve as evidence of the early stages of globalization and the rise in mass media in the region. The genre had similarities and differences across the Balkans and while Turbo-Folk was weaponized in Serbia for nationalist usage, it was also faced with responses from different parts of Yugoslavia.

### **Turbo-Folk in Serbia**

Originated in Serbia, the weaponization of this genre owes its widespread success to the propaganda machine of Milošević and his government. At first, the idea behind the weaponization of Turbo-Folk was to create a genre to promote Yugoslavian sovereignty and national identity. Most of the music made by Turbo-Folk Serbian artists focused on the sense of unity, patriotism, and extreme forms of ethnonationalism. The music videos feature elements of different Republics as well as trying to give a positive representation of the Yugoslavian society. At the time the market for rock and roll seemed to be vanishing while Turbo-Folk continued to survive despite the criticisms against it. Different from Pop-Folk and Neo-Folk, the new direction of folk music included images of consumer high life and some beats borrowed from Western commercial dances. In contrast to Neo-folk, Turbo-Folk represented the good life features of living in Serbia. (Eric Gordy, p. 136)

An example of such material is “Jugoslovenka” by Lepa Brena. The song centers itself around the unity of Yugoslavia and has patriotic undertones.

“Jugoslovenka” includes lyrics that showcase a sense of pride and nationalism in the Yugoslavian identity:

Where are you from, pretty girl  
who gave birth to the blue eye  
who gave you the golden hair  
who made you so passionate  
My eyes are Adriatic Sea  
my hair is Panonian wheat  
wistful is my Sloven soul  
I'm Yugoslavian

In Brena's lyrics, there are descriptions of Yugoslav physical characteristics, and these characteristics are sung and showcased in a way that is indicating a direct connection to the Yugoslavian identity. The music video features scenes to showcase the beauty of the countrysides of the nation and includes nationalistic symbolism.



In this scene from the music video what is apparent is the excitement of the youth holding the flag of the nation. This is a great example of how nationalistic symbols played a major role in Turbo-Folk music video productions. The music video includes scenes of the Yugoslavian youth from different Republics taking pride in their heritage, landscape, and essentially the Yugoslavian identity.



This scene is meant to show the consumer culture and the wealth of Yugoslavia. In contrast, as Eric Gordy explained in his book “The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives”, this and other music videos that showcase the Balkans as rich and upper-class are completely the opposite of what the citizens of Yugoslavia were experiencing at that time. Gordy argues that these are false and misleading depictions of wealth and consumer life while in reality, the economic situation of Yugoslavia did not allow for such depicted privileges for the majority of its citizens. Turbo-Folk music videos contained these false elements to promote the greatness of the nation and take pride in the different Republics. In other words, “Jugoslovenka” and other similar songs fall right under the category of Turbo-Folk propaganda music. While songs like “Jugoslovenka” promoted unity and brotherhood among different Balkan groups, the political stage of the Balkans was falling into fragmentation. And

the genre in Serbia moved from advocacy for a united Yugoslavia to promotion of Greater Serbia.

With the rise of nationalism in Serbia, other Serbian Turbo-Folk also included commentary on the war and conflict among the Balkans. The second primary source to exhibit such phenomena is the song “Ne volim te Alija” by Serbian nationalist Baja Mali Knindža, produced in 1993:

I don't like you Alija,  
because you're a *balija*,  
you destroyed a peaceful dream!  
May river Drina,  
take hundreds of your mujahedins,  
every day!

The lyrics contain anti-Bosnian tones and uses derogatory words such as *Balija* to describe the Bosnian people. In this song, Knindža talks about his strong dislike and hatred towards the Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović. These lyrics are a great example of how Turbo-Folk was used as a cultural weapon against non-Serbs of the Balkans.

Turbo-Folk, as a cultural weapon, came to the music scene with the help of Milošević and his cabinet. While the propaganda was successful in unifying the Serbian people and creating a sense of national identity, it also stood as a symbol of hatred and racism. Most music made within the genre act as an offense on the other Republics of Yugoslavia and the response to it included more Balkan-Pop music.



## The Croatian Response

While the Serbian nationalism within cultural institutions and the media gained more popularity and strength, Croatia entered the battle scene of Turbo-Folk as well. The response was more music videos produced regarding Croatian nationalism and the fight for independence. Following the arrest of Milošević and the passing of Tuđman, the presence of music in Croatia became increasingly more pronounced with more artists engaging in a musical battle.

Although Croatian response was also used for nationalist purposes, it differed from the Serbian genre in the sense that Croatian artists wanted to create this genre of music to be a strictly Croatian aspect of identity and culture. During the Croatian War of Independence from 1991 to 1995, music was used to create a sense of unifying identity for a Croatian state rather than promoting a “Croatian hegemon”, which is in contrast to Serbian artists and Serbia’s political agenda. To explain it in a war-perspective, Turbo-Folk acted started as an offense weapon by Serbia while music served as a defense in Croatia. In other words, the music made and exchanged between the two is more of cultural warfare than just a nationalistic competition. Another aspect was that most Croatian Pop focused on supporting the military and the Croatian independence, while the Serbian Turbo-Folk centered itself around consumer culture, political centralization, and diminishing such independence movements.

“Bojna Čavoglave” by Thompson (Marko Perković) produced in 1991 is a great example of how Turbo-Folk was used as a response to the Serbian aggression:

There stand Croat next to the Croat, we're all brothers,  
You won't get in Čavoglave while we are alive!  
Fire your Tompson, Kalashnikov and Zbrojovka  
Throw grenade, chase the gang through the spring!

Step forward, guns ready, let all of us sing the song:

"For our homes, brothers, for freedom, we are fighting"

The lyrics here are reinforcing a sense of cultural and national unity. Čavoglave is a village in Southern Croatia. This village is not by the sea or a tourist area and there is no depiction of what the Croatian lifestyle is like but rather the entire focus is on soldiers and their unity for war.



In this music video, there are not many depictions of the consumer life of Croatia but rather the focus is on the Croatian brotherhood and unity. There are not glamorized images of high life but rather humble imagery of Croatian soldiers.



An interesting shot in this music video is of the singer and the church behind him. In a way, not just Turbo-Folk, but religion was also used as a defense weapon in this cultural warfare.

Listen now to the message of St. Elias:

"You will not get in Čavoglave, as you didn't before!"

Thus, there is some Catholic imagery that is associated with a sense of hope and unity. Religion has always played a key role in the psychological aspects of warfare, and here it is depicted as a motivation to protect Croatian lands. This was also to distinguish it from the Orthodox Christian faith, which is associated with Serbia.

However, with the end of the war, the lyrics of Pop music in Croatia also became less violent. The last primary source to look at is a song made a few years after the end of the Croatian War of Independence. "Hrvatica" by Severina was made in 2004. It is apparent that after almost a decade after the war the tension in the lyrics are less aggressive yet still very nationalistic:

Still haven't married well  
 but I have a strong wish  
 Just as long as it's a man  
 I'm not looking for a needle in a haystack

I'm transparent like government leaders  
 I sovereignly reign over territories  
 independent, everyone is under my thumb  
 I don't fall for the collective euphoria

I, I'm faithful to you like a nun  
like every other Croatian girl  
sweet like honey  
for you, ready for anything

The lyrics are suggesting that the Croatian government is transparent with its people and has sovereignty over its territories. One could suggest that Severina is criticizing other Balkan states' government leaders. What is interesting in this song is that there is also a brief mention of Catholicism. Much like the song by Perković they are religious undertones in this song as well, this could suggest that Catholicism plays a crucial part within Croatian culture and society. Although this music video was produced almost a decade after the Croatian War of Independence, there are still nationalistic undertones in both the lyrics and the music video. For example, for almost half of the music video, the background behind Severina is the Croatian national flag.



Concisely, Croatian artists were able to engage in somewhat of cultural warfare with Serbia and use music as a soft power for propaganda and commentary on the social and political

issues of the region. One could argue that on this battlefield, that was the music industry, the Serbs seem to be more on the offense and the Croats on the defense.

## **Conclusion**

This research paper was an attempt to better understand the origins of Turbo-Folk as well as its impacts on the social and political scene of two rival Republics of Serbia and Croatia.

Turbo-Folk entered the music industry during an uncanny time of Balkan history and was weaponized to be used as a tool for Milošević's propaganda purposes. The Serbian political aggression in the region as well as the military responses to that aggression resulted in the Balkan population suffocating in a war for ethnic states. The lyrics and music videos of Turbo-Folk offer a great insight into the nationalist propaganda of the time as well as a social understanding of the different Balkan identities.

Started in Serbia, Turbo-Folk brought the music industry under its control and was able to survive and adapt to different cultures and people of Southeastern Europe. Though Serbia may have lost the war on the field, the tones of Turbo-Folk are ever-lasting and will continue to tell stories of war and memories of conflict. In a sense, it appears that most of the music in Croatia acted as a way of propaganda as well but in a different manner than Serbia. First, this propaganda was not entirely state-led, and second, it could be characterized as war propaganda rather than a consumer culture one. To better explain, during the process of Balkanization, it was not just Turbo-Folk that became a victim of weaponization, but that the cultural warfare came naturally as the Republics were in a state of conflict.

Despite the conflicts, Turbo-Folk has continued to survive outside of its weaponry aspect. Today the genre acts as a progressive platform for minority voices, especially for the Balkan

LGBTQ+ community. What was once used a weapon of war has now shifted its focus to broadcasting voices and faces that were once overshadowed by horrors of fragmentation. The weaponization of Turbo-Folk and other music genres of the Balkans demonstrates the vital role of media representation and culture in securing and promoting national and political identities.

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