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Belgrade, 2026

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:
Čedomir Markov

Title:
Generative Contradictions, Unfinished Worlds: Post-Yugoslav Youth Imaginaries from Ljubljana and Beyond

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Publishers:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:
Lucy Stevens

Cover design:
Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:
Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:
Belgrade, 2026

ISBN:
978-86-6190-050-1

Replicate:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:
50 copies

This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.
The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

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Abstract

This paper examines how internationally exposed post-Yugoslav youth imagine futures amid inherited uncertainty, digital transformation, and semi-peripheral constraints. Drawing on two exploratory focus groups of young people – Ljubljana-based and those digitally embedded from the former Yugoslav region – the paper moves from attitudes to imaginaries through which futures are made possible, believable, and livable. It defines a framework of six contradictions (roots/routes, commons/commodities, determinism/possibilism, epistemic rigor/drift, accumulation/survival, and peripheralism/pericentrism) that interact across three domains: horizons of possibility, modes of interpretation, and practices of life-making. Based on the empirical insights, the analysis identifies twelve provisional imaginaries that show how post-Yugoslav youth live with uncertainty, digital transformation, semi-peripheral constraint, and the search for collective

belonging.. The central argument is that post-Yugoslav youth see their futures as structured by generative contradictions: personal advancement coexists alongside collective decline, digital opportunity alongside exhaustion, mobility alongside unresolved belonging, and democratic idealism alongside institutional distrust. The paper concludes by arguing for a possibilist politics of attachment that treats youth as participants in rebuilding social infrastructure, regional scale, and meaningful collective futures.

Introduction

Existing research on post-Yugoslav youth has mapped attitudes toward democracy, migration, employment, Europe, politics, digital life, and the future (Pollozhani 2026; Fiket et al. 2026; Majstorovic and Turjacanin 2013; Taleski and Hoppe 2015). Yet youth opinions about the future cannot be fully captured through surveys alone. Surveys can show whether young people intend to leave, whether they trust democracy, feel optimistic, or support Europe, but they cannot reveal the socially structured narratives that shaped these opinions. Opinions are formed within fields of power, inherited dispositions, and a sense of what is (un)realistic, (il)legitimate, or (im)possible (Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Ng et al. 2016; Bourdieu 1977, 2000). For post-Yugoslav youth, the future is shaped by the afterlives of a complex past as they navigate pressures from global systemic transformations. This paper, therefore, shifts from attitudes to *imaginaries*: the futures young people presume, informed by the histories they carry, which in turn shape the practices they use to live with uncertainty.

The paper focuses on a specific segment of post-Yugoslav youth: highly educated, internationally exposed, and articulate young people. It enquires into how they envision futures in the face of inherited uncertainty (and, at times, trauma) and semi-peripheral positioning unfolding in the context of an uncertain globalization (intensified by digital transformation). It does so in the aftermath of fading collective promises of socialism, Yugoslavia, transition, Europeanization, liberal democracy, and the once-idealized vision of migration as escape.

The global literature on Generation Z is an important reference point for understanding post-Yugoslav Gen Z because digital infrastructure has made youth experience transnational across different regional and class contexts (Black and Walsh 2019). Post-Yugoslav Generation Z, however, carries a distinct historical burden, transmitted through their parents who were shaped by crisis, displacement, unemployment, corruption, broken promises, and, in some cases, war (Spasenić 2011), which sets them apart from the more generic figure of global Gen Z. Idiosyncratic experiences shape survival strategies that often center on migration (Vracic 2018; Vangeli 2010; Leitner 2021; OECD 2022). For this reason, the paper speaks of a *post-Yugoslav space* rather than simply the Western Balkans. "Post-Yugoslav" keeps visible the political trajectories, solidarities, ruptures, unfinished transitions, and earlier futures still present today (Jansen 2015; Jović 2022). Young people live markedly *after* the state of Yugoslavia and sometimes with the idea of Yugoslavia as a political-cultural inheritance, (lost) achievement, burden, and loss, sometimes all at once.

Conceptually, the paper uses *imaginaries* – shared narratives and background understandings through which people make sense of what is real, possible, and desirable (Taylor 2002; Castoriadis 2005; Beckert 2013; Adams et al. 2025). Imaginaries are thicker than opinions and thinner than ideologies. In the post-Yugoslav youth context, they appear as fragments: migration stories, political jokes, housing complaints, venting about institutions, digital escape fantasies, references to Yugoslavia, and claims about what "people like us" can or cannot do. The shift to imaginaries is a shift from measuring positions to reconstructing worlds in which positions emerge (Manolova 2024). Imagined futures need not be certain or even coherent; they need only be sufficiently imaginable (Beckert 2024, 2016). Post-Yugoslav youth imaginaries are orientation systems for navigating socio-economic and political realities.

The paper builds on two exploratory focus groups probing how imaginaries are articulated, contested, and made plausible in interaction (Mische 2009). The first focus group, featuring six

Ljubljana-based post-Yugoslav youth (five of them born outside Slovenia), examines mobility, belonging, hierarchy, and Yugoslav afterlives. The second focus group, featuring five digitally embedded young people from Serbia, Croatia, and North Macedonia – four of whom have passed through (or are still in) Ljubljana – examines semi-peripheral futures shaped by digital infrastructure, remote work, and the contingencies of globalization. The participants are MA/PhD students/graduates, early-career researchers, startup founders, digital professionals, and activists, all of them adept at pro-actively imagining and narrating the future through the acts of writing study and/or job applications, pitching projects, moving between countries, talking to their families back home and ultimately leveraging reflection, mobility, and self-optimization against uncertainty (Cuzzocrea 2018). Ljubljana is treated as a vantage point: a university city, a destination for post-Yugoslav mobility, and a post-Yugoslav node within a society that often narrates itself as having escaped Yugoslavia. For many newcomers from the rest of former Yugoslavia, Ljubljana can be both familiar and distant: a place where *Balkan culture* is visible and even enjoyed, while *Balkan people* do not always feel fully at ease, recognized, or socially at home. The additional digital context, particularly central for the second focus group, is marked by a technological restructuring of economic and social life, which now appears more ethereal and flexible, but only within the limitations defined by the persistent material challenges of living costs, family duties, and regional hierarchies (Haidar et al. 2021; Cruz and Soeiro 2025).

The central argument is that the imaginaries of post-Yugoslav youth are structured by generative contradictions. Young people separate personal futures from collective ones, technological futures from political ones, mobility from belonging, and digital opportunity from digital capture. Their imaginaries weave through optimism and pessimism, apathy and mobilization, vigilance and myth, nostalgia and historical distance. Increasingly, however, young people imagine their future outside the community context, even when physically present, leading us to seek new political, social, and regional alternatives.

Conceptual Framework

The future is imagined from a position shaped by family history, class location, institutional experience, regional hierarchy, and inherited wounds (Adam and Groves 2007). Young people encounter the future through a socially formed (Furlong and Cartmel 2006) sense of the possible, "haunted" (McPherson 2025) by family memory, class position, educational and migratory pathways, digital exposure, geopolitical hierarchy, and the lived experience of tumultuous social transformation (Van Lanen 2021). Of course, if one zooms out, in the post-Yugoslav space, any future narrative is set in an already crowded discursive field of imagination and sedimented memories (Mišina 2016; Maksimović 2017).

This project began by translating field notes and exploratory conversations gathered over the years, shaped by interactions with post-Yugoslav Gen Z, into a grounded-theoretical framework of six conceptual contradictions through which post-Yugoslav youth confront uncertainty. The first, *roots/routes*, concerns place and mobility. It moves beyond brain drain discussions (Borici and Çaça 2025; Topalović and Hampel 2023; Beckers 2024) and the stay/leave binary by treating mobility neither as pure exit nor as pure loyalty (Hirschman 2004), but rather as a strategy for managing constraint (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004), shaped by context (Forsberg 2019; Cuzzocrea 2018; Castles 2010), asymmetries (Christophers et al. 2018; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), and introspection (De Haas 2021).

The second contradiction, *commons/commodities*, concerns work, value, and social obligation: collective goods, solidarity, public services, and social usefulness versus individual accumulation, wage maximization, status consumption, and self-enterprise. It examines whether young people still have the capacity to imagine parts of life that are above the market logic (Fisher 2022) after decades of undoing the legacy of socialism (Kirn 2022) and the inculcation of market fundamentalism into education, culture, attention, intimacy, health, and even identity (Fraser 2022; Brown 2017; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999).

The third contradiction, *determinism/possibilism*, concerns temporal agency (Koselleck 2004) and the capacity to imagine

alternatives (Appadurai 2009). In the face of uncertainty, actors inhabit imagined futures that guide action in the present (Beckert 2016). Possibilism, inspired by Hirschman (Vangeli 2025; Lepenies 2008), refers to a modest refusal to accept the given order as a final reality. In the post-Yugoslav space, possibilism implies searching for openings within a world seen as damaged, delayed, captured, already lost, or dependent on external saviors.

The fourth contradiction, *epistemic rigor/epistemic drift*, concerns truth, evidence, and interpretation in an environment of institutional mistrust, media fragmentation, algorithmic amplification, conspiracy thinking, propaganda, irony, and information overload (Hameleers and van der Meer 2025; Lewandowsky and Garcia 2026). Epistemic drift is the condition when everything appears relative and suspicious at once (Latour 2004): truth remains desirable, but its authority loses practical force (Abiri and Buchheim 2022). In the post-Yugoslav space, this can also be a defensive adaptation to competing "truths" attached to trauma, domestic critique, or external narratives.

The fifth contradiction, *accumulation/survival*, concerns the material and ecological horizon of world- and life-making: aspiration, income, consumption, growth, environmental awareness, health, and exhaustion. Ecological concerns rarely appear as pure post-materialist values; they are tied to rent, wages, family duties, air pollution, heat, debt, and the struggle to build a life. A future that consumes one's life in the name of security, success, development, or escape is not necessarily a future (Hägglund 2019). New opportunities for accumulation in the digital economy may or may not help chart an exit from dependency.

The sixth contradiction, *peripheralism/pericentrism*, concerns geopolitical imagination. It asks whether young people from the post-Yugoslav space imagine their societies as objects of decisions made elsewhere or as spaces where meaningful agency can still be exercised. Peripheralism names a condition in which the region appears shaped by Brussels, Washington, Moscow, Beijing, investors, donors, platforms, migration regimes, and the pedagogy of catching up (Valiani 2021; Boatcă 2015; Velikonja 2004). Pericentrism does not deny asymmetry; it recovers agency

within dependency through regional connection, strategic literacy, local initiative, historical memory, and world-reading from a position usually treated as marginal (Vangeli 2025).

Juxtaposed together, these six contradictions are analytically distinguishable, even if empirically entangled: mobility, truth, work, ecology, belonging, and geopolitical position can appear as bundled pressures, openings, disappointments, and half-formed possibilities. In practice, they operate through three domains of recursion, in which different constellations of contradictions dialectically produce imaginaries. ***Horizons of possibility*** concern how the future appears as open, closed, postponed, lost, or contestable. Possibility here is considered historically and socially produced (Pickering 2004; Koselleck 2004). ***Modes of interpretation*** concern how young people construct a reliable interpretive grip on reality, including everyday cognitive vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010) and the labor of deciding what is real enough to act upon (Flew 2025; Abiri and Buchheim 2022). Possibility here is taken as epistemic before it becomes actionable. Finally, ***practices of life-making*** concern how young people organize finite lives under structural constraint and how they exercise bounded agency (Evans 2007; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Lahire 2011), shifting attention from declared stances to practical arrangements of staying, leaving, circulating, working remotely, accumulating credentials, protecting time, caring for others, and keeping options open. Possibility, therefore is also intertwined with mobility, in more general terms (Carling and Collins 2018).

Imaginaries

The twelve imaginaries below are generated through an iterative reading of the focus group material. The six contradictions are used to identify the recurring tensions through which participants narrate the future, while the three domains help map where these tensions appear: in horizons of possibility, modes of interpretation, and practices of life-making. The analysis therefore reconstructs how different tensions combine in practice, producing provisional imaginaries through which post-Yugoslav youth make futures possible, believable, and livable under condi-

tions in which every opening arrives with a limit, and every limit forces another way of imagining the future.

Horizons of possibility

Imaginary 1.1. Inherited risk. The Ljubljana focus group participants repeatedly described the future as an early burden rather than a distant horizon. Young people are "pushed to start thinking about the future at an early age," especially about "where I will live and what I will do," before they gain stable resources of their own (Black and Walsh 2019). The post-Yugoslav layer turns this pressure into inheritance. Parents lived through state disintegration, transformed social guarantees, war and its aftershocks, displacement, privatization, corruption, and "getting by." One participant says, "we now live in a better time," "safer, economically better," while noting that it was once easier "to buy something, to buy a house, or a flat." The past, often reaching back to the Yugoslav period, is stripped of overly positive or negative interpretations and has become the measure against which the present is judged, and the future feared (Maksimović 2017; Petrović 2013).

Family memory paradoxically individualizes possibility. Wanting a "higher salary" or a "more luxurious apartment" produces guilt when compared with what parents "lived through." For another participant, the same memory becomes pressure to "provide for my family" and "carry the weight" of family stressors. Without sense of collective belonging, personal advancement becomes the main reservoir of possibility, although it is still morally audited by parental survival.

Imaginary 1.2. Hope through the cracks. Several participants preserve hope by simply limiting its scope. They separate personal futures from collective decline, technological futures from political futures, mobility from belonging, and digital opportunity from digital capture. One participant describes "navigating [...] personal or career successes" while "battling with [...] the shitstorm that's happening around." Another reduces the horizon to survival: "If we survive the next couple of years, it's gonna be fine."

This is a restrained form of possibilism, built around small, exceptional openings rather than confident optimism. Migrants can feel hopeful because "our personal lives are changing," with jobs, money, and "better prospects," even as wider trends remain negative. Hope is made actionable through lists, tasks, and self-discipline: "I just need to do this, that, and that, and things will be better." What is specific about the post-Yugoslav context is the gap between trans-generational, inherited narratives of (lost) solidarity, state failure, and family obligation, and contemporary tactics centered on optimization, freelancing, digital skills, and enduring "the hustle."

Imaginary 1.3. The digital way out. The online group repeatedly separated political decline from new technological possibilities. One respondent says the future looks "grim," describing it as "doom and gloom," citing energy markets, tariffs, property prices, and conservative politics. Yet, they still want to "take advantage" of their position. Another directly expresses the separation: "I would have to decouple the political future and technological future." If the topic is "digitalization, AI, technology," then "a great future is ahead if we use it properly."

Participants do not treat AI, software, and global platforms as innocent or reliable. However, they do see them as practical tools in otherwise constrained environments. Even if shaped by "immoral" extractive platforms and tech elites, they remain compelling for those seeking exits from blocked geography. At its core, digital-bypass imaginary is about connecting while staying partly here.

One respondent says the internet is "super important for my job, my existence," because "we don't have to be in the US, in the Imperial Core, to have huge paychecks anymore." Another says business imagination now begins with "what can I create online," "as a software, as a service." A further participant argues that "regionality and where you come from is becoming increasingly irrelevant" because "everyone has the same tools at hand." This produces a meritocratic fantasy: "It boils down to how competent a person is and how deep they want to dig." It also individualizes failure while leaving structural asymmetries largely intact (Casilli 2017; Robinson et al. 2020).

Imaginary 1.4. Haunted by enduring territoriality. Housing, salary, rent, care, and recognition serve to bring discussion back from the digital domain into the physical one. One respondent calls property prices "disgusting" and wonders how someone earning an average slary could buy property "without going severely into debt." A Ljubljana participant notes that friends back home have "similar salaries," yet own property thanks to inheritance or lower prices.

This also complicates the old migration script (Keating et al. 2024). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, young people were encouraged to leave because "out somewhere is better." In the meantime, because the West "isn't as ideal" anymore, some people have returned. Parents still imagine "outside" as more viable, but "it's not like that anymore." Family and community matter economically, too. In the Balkans, "you can call your mom" to help out with childcare; in the West, childcare is "one of the most expensive services." Young people may access global opportunities while remaining severely constrained by local housing prices, insufficient wages, and the lack of care infrastructures.

Ljubljana, in some sense, represents a particular stage of post-Yugoslav futurity: territorially close and culturally similar enough to be familiar, European enough to signal advancement, and hierarchical enough to establish a firm limit on how much one can succeed. One can move "up" without fully "making it," be part of a community without full recognition, and remain somewhat stuck within a supposedly European future.

Modes of interpretation

Imaginary 2.1. The discomfort of the 'real.' Participants describe reality as something assembled from fragments. One participant from the Ljubljana group says there is "so much information, so much to choose from," so "you have to pick who you trust"; there is no longer "one reliable source telling you this is right and this is wrong." This pushes responsibility for judgment onto individuals; each person must decide whom to trust and what counts as reliable enough, or, as the participant puts it, "you have to create your own opinions."

The issue is not only generational. Participants note similar mistrust among older people. The mistrust they describe is not entirely new. In the post-Yugoslav context, platformed uncertainty builds on older habits of doubting institutions, the media, political narratives, and official truths. The post-Yugoslav space carries unresolved truths about socialism, war, nationalism, Europe, corruption, victimhood, and departure. One participant's urge to respond to "Where are you from?" with "Yugoslavia" captures the need for a category that can accommodate mixed biographies that can help circumvent the harsh realities of fragmentation in successor states. Ljubljana intensifies this sentiment. Participants read belonging through accents, surnames, coldness, jokes, and recognition. One does not "definitely" feel Slovene after years in Slovenia. The uncomfortable-truth imaginary, therefore, gets paradoxically easier to bear with the increase of social distance; social distance provides the critical maneuvering space for reinventing reality, or at least one's own self.

Imaginary 2.2. Performativity and conditionality of truth. Participants point to "too much information," eroded trust in "academic sources," and "the performative aspect of truth or of being right," in which authority depends less on validity than on "your confidence to actually express it." This is epistemic drift: people continue to need truth, but they are unable to verify it. The online group adds a moral layer. Respondents note that corruption is widely criticized in society, yet also "openly accepted if you get into a position where you're able to use it." Being aware of someone's corrupt behavior does not automatically render them corrupt. Truth, as a sense of justice, is conditional on where one stands in relation to power, opportunity, and need; its problem is positional as much as epistemological.

Imaginary 2.3. Vibe politics. Political interpretation is organized through different heuristics: compression, affect, and the logic of online platforms . Participants note that appearances – symbolic, political, but also physical – have always mattered, but social media intensifies this effect because this is the first generation "born and [...] grew up using social media." Democracy is valued "because of freedom," yet voting feels devoid of purpose:

"voting is only 1% of democracy." Another participant says that there is "no one to vote for," because every candidate, once scrutinized, has a "deal breaker." A third voted for an alternative option ironically and kept the ballot photo "as a meme."

Protests represent a democratic form that still feels alive. In the current age, it is "a cool thing to do," tied to "social media, pop culture," solidarity, and inclusion. Yet participants also recognize the limits of how much protests can achieve. In Youth for Climate Justice, while older members focused on "content," policy comments, and legal responses, younger members "just wanted to protest." When the older members left, "the whole movement collapsed because it could not be based on protests only." The contradiction lies between expressive, *vibe* politics and infrastructural politics. The post-Yugoslav space has a rich protest repertoire (Greenberg 2014), but weak channels for converting mobilization into durable institutional change.

Imaginary 2.4. Contact against division. Participants in both focus groups interpret polarization across former Yugoslavia as a top-down phenomenon, as opposed to bottom-up commonality. One participant says polarization is "overblown" and often "manufactured to sustain certain divisions." When people are actually able to speak, they have "so much more in common" than the media or political leaders suggest, including across "conflict-ridden areas." Some nevertheless view the prospects of building social consensus on key issues as difficult; others insist that "we need to reach a consensus" because "we need to survive."

The imaginary here is that social contact can help withstand weaponized division. Contact does not erase conflict but helps demythologize it as organized, narrated, maintained, and sometimes exaggerated. In Ljubljana, where young people from all over former Yugoslav interact, a sense of embodied proximity emerges: differences are relativized rather than deepened through accents, surnames, stereotypes, hesitations, and the intimacy of being close without fully belonging.

Practices of life-making

Imaginary 3.1. Digital work, local exhaustion. Digital work partially de-territorializes core-periphery relations by allowing

semi-peripheral actors to access core markets without moving their bodies. Digital work connects participants to global markets, with the caveat that fatigue, isolation, and daily discipline are lived locally.

One participant in the online group says the internet is "super important for my job, for my existence," but also describes being online "12, 14 hours per day," not leaving the house "for three or four days," and struggling to "separate myself from the internet." Still, they remain "thankful for it" because it allows them to work with foreign companies from "anywhere." Another participant gives insights into a corporate setting: "There is no meeting without AI," "There is no meeting that's not recorded," and the manager is notified if they are offline for even five minutes. Their future fantasy is "abandoning the digital world for good."

The digital tether loosens some local constraints while introducing new forms of extraction and exploitation. The region retains the body while digital work extracts attention, energy, and social imagination.

Imaginary 3.2. Indebted route. Beyond the mere fact of a young person's departure from home, there are moral, familial, affective, and historical factors that make departure conceivable and legitimate, but also painful and sometimes impossible. Through mobility, young people negotiate inheritance, obligation, recognition, and the fear of a wasted life.

For many post-Yugoslav Gen Z youth, personal ambitions are morally scrutinized and measured against parental visions of the future. In the Ljubljana group, one participant describes the old postwar mobility script clearly: "Outside of our country is better. So move out." Another doubles down on how parents and grandparents portrayed *inostranstvo* as a place with "better paychecks" and "smaller costs." A third participant says that when they think of wanting a better life, they feel "extremely guilty" because they remember what their parents "had lived through" and "still had a fuel" to fight. Another says this memory produces pressure rather than motivation. They feel they must "provide" for their family and be a "stable, sane person" capable of carrying "the burden" of family stressors.

Imaginary 3.3. Credentialed exit. Young people are "constantly reminded of our CVs": Erasmus, traineeships, internships, foreign degrees, digital portfolios. Unlike in the Western context, where mobility can still be presented as enrichment, self-discovery, or elective cosmopolitanism, in the post-Yugoslav context, credentialed mobility makes up for institutional insufficiency and presumed deficit. It builds the infrastructure that domestic systems failed to provide.

For a whole generation of young people from all over former Yugoslavia, Ljubljana is central to this economy: close, tuition-accessible, more Europeanized, professionally useful, and symbolically higher in the regional hierarchy. Yet recognition remains incomplete. One participant says, "I don't feel Slovenian"; another notes that surnames ending with "-ić" are "automatically a bit different"; a new citizen says voting is "all there is" when it comes to being Slovene. Credentialed mobility can also produce an unsettled position, such as diminished ties to one's home, incomplete recognition in Ljubljana, and continued sense of distance from whatever "Europe" is supposed to mean.

Imaginary 3.4. The search for collective belonging. The biggest challenge to the brain-drain paradigms comes from one participant who rejects the idea that mobility is "about doing the math." They could stay in Serbia and "live a very good life," but leave because "I don't identify with Serbia. I don't identify as a Serbian." The goal is "finding a community": people who "share the values" and are "hungry to change the world."

This resembles a commodified search for community, close to digital nomadism (Busuttil 2026), yet it can also be read as a displaced longing for a collective horizon. What participants seem to want is not only better income or mobility, but a setting where their work, values, and relationships feel socially meaningful. In a post-Yugoslav frame, this points to a longing for a collective dimension. One participant captures Yugo-talk beyond nostalgia: younger people may look to Yugoslavia as a "role model of better times, a potential future that would be better than this one," while not necessarily endorsing the idea of restoring the old federation. The old Yugoslav world is viewed as having been sus-

tained by dense sociality, family networks, neighborhood familiarity, student circles, workplace collectivities, and informal solidarities. New life-making practices are progressively emerging across dispersed platforms, living in rented rooms, professional self-branding and CV building – but, crucially, they come without a sense of belonging, nor greater (shared) narrative of purpose.

Concluding discussion: Generative contradictions, unfinished politics

Post-Yugoslav youth futures are assembled from contradictions that pull in opposite directions: personal advancement alongside collective decline; digital opportunity alongside exhaustion; mobility alongside longing; democracy alongside distrust; ecological concern alongside material survival; regional attachment alongside geopolitical smallness. These contradictory imaginaries generate pressure that makes the status quo intolerable, turning private frustration into a latent demand for collective action and reveal that the problem is not a lack of imagination, but the absence of institutional capacity to act on it.

Participants often describe themselves as apolitical, yet their accounts are full of political judgment against corruption, humiliation, fake meritocracy, platform overwork, and weak institutions, as well as the strategic use of protest, irony, exit, and the search for people with whom a future would be worth building.

The central insight is that private futures are easier to imagine than collective repair, which renders the latter ever more urgent. Participants had opinions on almost everything, yet institutional solutions often became harder, or even impossible to articulate. Imagination appears less as a collective program than as a biographical project: migration, digital work, family negotiation, protest, humor, and the search for a more meaningful collective setting.

Therefore, a possibilist politics begins with this palpable void. Possibilism asks how do we contemplate social change in worlds that, primarily and predominantly, prompt people to look after themselves. For post-Yugoslav youth, the usual youth policy repertoire of employability, participation, and digital skills is

insufficient. The task is to build arrangements in which staying, returning, circulating, or staying connected becomes socially rooted rather than an individualistic move. That requires social infrastructure, recognition, regional scale, and institutions that create tangible, lasting consequences for young people, which, in their language, can sound like a win.

Policy implications: From opportunity to attachment

Post-Yugoslav youth already receive fragments of opportunity: studying abroad, remote work, AI tools, internships, startup calls, mobility schemes, youth councils, and NGO projects. These opportunities often pull them out of local collective life. They create movement, ambition, and participation, but also diminished attachment, limited recognition, and an enduring sense that one's efforts do not add up to anything lasting in life nor meaningful beyond one's immediate self-interest. What young people lack are mechanisms that connect personal ambition with collective mission, digital mobility with local embeddedness, regional affection with new and meaningful regional cooperation, and expressive politics with material consequence.

Therefore, the policy recommendations for post-Yugoslav governments include:

- Treat brain drains as a crisis of attachment, recognition, and consequence. Young people leave, return, circulate, or digitally check out when ambition has no resonance, and effort does not convert into meaningful participation in public life. Beyond patriotic pleading, institutions must make staying or remaining connected worth one's finite time in life. A post-Yugoslav *youth guarantee* should center on consequences, such as paid public-interest work linked to housing access, municipal problem-solving missions, regional civic service, and institutional pathways through which young people can build, manage, repair, or govern something real ("skin in the game" (Taleb 2018)).
- This means replacing performative youth politics (youth councils and consultations) with bounded control over real

resources: small municipal budgets, unused public spaces, cultural programming, housing pilots, and university-community initiatives. A youth body with control over resources becomes more accountable, leaves material traces, and develops stronger local roots.

- Rebuild the social infrastructure of possibility and make it more *regional* (post-Yugoslav). The region's offer to young people should be centered on social infrastructure that makes life less atomized. Importantly, this atomization should be multi-scalar, occurring at the levels of the neighborhood, city, country, and region (perhaps even the world). The importance of the region is most significant: post-Yugoslav youth still move, compare, joke, study, work, build relationships and lives, and most importantly, imagine across the territory of the former federation. Meanwhile, policy remains trapped in small national containers. Governments should start by mutually recognizing credentials and boosting joint and regional funding for culture and research, youth cooperatives, civic fellowships, digital platforms, and public-interest projects. These should be bottom-up and domestically conceived, rather than externally scripted.

Recommendations for Slovenia and Ljubljana:

- Ljubljana should embrace its role as a post-Yugoslav hub. It already benefits immensely from regional talent. Post-Yugoslav youth should be able to shape the city they already inhabit, which would, in turn, generate deeper civic loyalty, better integration, stronger regional networks, greater cultural and intellectual vitality, and a substantive connection between Slovenia and the rest of the former Yugoslavia in ways no branding strategy can manufacture.
- Slovenia should provide greater opportunities for post-Yugoslav students and young professionals to exercise their role as long-term participants in its civic, social, and economic future. Tuition access opens the door, yet rent, bureaucracy, weak recognition, and limited pathways into public and professional life decide whether regional talent

becomes Slovenia-rooted or merely passes through. Migrants from other parts of former Yugoslavia carry lived knowledge of the semi-periphery and can help Slovenia build pericentric capacity in an uncertain, multipolar world. A possibilist policy would start from a simple insight: many of the people Slovenia needs are already here. The question is whether institutions can recognize them as people with a stake in the country's future, not merely as students, workers, or demographic fillers.

Ultimately, the central policy question across the post-Yugoslav space is how to turn scattered opportunities for youth into a common agenda across scales. Post-Yugoslav youth have imagination, perhaps too much of it, moving across family obligations, weak institutions, digital markets, and a post-Yugoslav region that remains socially real even as it is politically fragmented and unrecognized as such. Yet these contradictions also produce refusal. They make the status quo difficult to accept, even when alternatives remain unclear. The task is to build places, institutions, and regional projects where these future imaginaries can gain momentum and become more than private escape plans: in Gen Z language, we need to find a way of building something big together.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

316.662-053.81(497.1)

VANGELI, Anastas
Generative contradictions, unfinished worlds: post-Yugoslav youth imaginaries from Ljubljana and beyond
[Elektronski izvor] / Anastas Vangeli. - Belgrade : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory : Regional Center
for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS ; Rijeka : Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies
of Southeast Europe, 2026 (Beograd : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory). - 1 elektronski optički disk
(CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm. - (Book Series Square ; [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade])

Sistemski zahtevi: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 50. - Bibliografija.

ISBN 978-86-6190-050-1 (IPST)

а) Омладина -- Друштвена улога -- Бивше југословенске републике

COBISS.SR-ID 198922761