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## Psychological research and practice in former Yugoslavia and its successors

### Abstract

The paper presents a brief history of Yugoslav psychology and a review of the current state of psychological research and practice in the former Yugoslav countries. Bibliometric mapping was used to explore the knowledge domain and international visibility of psychological research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Judging by the number of papers visible in Scopus, psychological research activity in these countries is similar to the other former communist countries. In a relative sense, it is even higher in Slovenia and Croatia. However, psychologists still rely heavily on national journals indexed in Scopus when publishing their papers. Regarding the psychological practice, former Yugoslav countries are facing challenges that are more or less typical for all small countries in the global scientific and economic market. Having in mind all the obstacles and traumas in the past decades, it should be considered a success that psychology in former Yugoslav countries is now a fully established profession and adequately recognized scientific discipline.

**Keywords:** former Yugoslavia, psychological research, psychological practice, bibliometric analysis, national journals

### Prologue

It is challenging to write a historical paper about a country that not only ceased to exist but is also remembered differently by different groups of people. Perceived by some as an ideal state for most of the South Slavs and by others as a “dungeon of nations”, Yugoslavia was formed in 1918 as *Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes*. It was temporarily dissolved during the World War II and constituted again in 1945 as a socialist federation of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Yugoslavia’s final break up in 1992 was followed by the bloodiest European conflict after the World War II (Hoare, 2010). Thirty years later, intellectual elites, media, and general public in Yugoslav successor states still express divergent and often irreconcilable views on the role and responsibility of political leaders and even the whole nations both for the inception and for the tragic failure of this multi-ethnic project. In an effort to build separate and unique national identities, they are focusing less on the common heritage but more on their cultural, historical, ethnical, political, and religious differences. In such a constellation, referring to “Yugoslav” (psychological) science as a whole would be somewhat misleading. In order to avoid possible biases, the term “Yugoslav” in this paper should be considered toponym for a geographical region, rather than the name for a country that had a joint course and policy of scientific development.

## A brief history of Yugoslav psychology

Although the origins of psychological thought in Yugoslavia could be traced to the works of philosophers and educationalists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the interwar period that Yugoslav psychology was established as an objective scientific discipline. Ramiro Bujas (1879 – 1959), a philosopher who obtained his PhD in Graz, established in 1920 the first psychological laboratory at the Faculty of Medicine in Zagreb. Nine years later, he founded the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb and in 1932 initiated the first Yugoslav psychology journal. Ramiro Bujas' tradition in experimental psychology was continued by his son Zoran (1910 – 2004) who was a Henri Piéron's student. At about the same time, in 1928, department of psychology was established at the University of Belgrade. Two names are especially relevant for the constitution of Serbian psychology: Branislav Petronijević (1875 – 1954), a philosopher who introduced psychology to philosophy studies at Belgrade University, and Borislav Stevanović who defended his PhD dissertation before the commission whose member was Charles Spearman and is known for standardizing the *Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale* in 1934. In 1930, Baja Bajić (1896 – 1988), who graduated psychology in Paris, initiated the Seminar for experimental psychology in Skopje, then part of Belgrade University. In general, Western educational background of the pioneers in Yugoslav psychology largely determined its course of development as a strongly empirical discipline. Unfortunately, this development was abruptly interrupted by World War II.

## Yugoslav psychology during the communist era

During the first few years after the end of World War II, Yugoslav psychology was under the strong influence of Soviet ideology (Marinkovic, 1992). First published books in psychology were translations from Russian, all types of testing were practically banned, and topics in psychoanalysis were demised. However, after Tito's breakup with Stalin's politics in 1948, Yugoslavia has established firm connections with Western countries and Yugoslav psychology was strongly shifted towards Western authors and literature. This has initiated the period of rapid growth and affirmation of psychology in Yugoslav academic community. Departments of psychology were established in Ljubljana (1950), Niš (1968), Skopje (1973), Rijeka (1978), Zadar (1978), Novi Sad (1982), and Sarajevo (1989). The Association of Psychologists of FNR Yugoslavia was established in 1953 and the Institute of Psychology in Belgrade in 1961. Journal *Psihologija* was founded in 1967 and is still one of the most influential and the longest lasting regional psychology journal indexed in all major international databases. Adaptations of Western psychological tests, such as *Wechsler Scales* and *MMPI*, were widely used.

Growth in the number of psychologists and psychology students raised the need for quality literature. Almost a hundred psychology textbooks were published in national language(s) during the late 70s and early 80s. Psychological research was largely based on solid data and experimental methodology (commonly known as *Zagreb psychological school*), particularly at Croatian universities. Clinical psychology was hence not evenly developed and was more represented at Belgrade University where Vojin Matić (1910 – 1999) founded the first department for clinical psychology in 1952 and Hugo Klajn (1894 – 1982) published a book entitled *War neuroses of Yugoslavs* in 1955. The evolution of clinical psychology in Yugoslavia best shows how the development of psychology took a different and more prosperous course compared to the other communist countries due to the more liberal form of communism.

Other communist countries had to wait at least several more years for the famous Khrushchev's secret speech, abandonment of the rhetoric about psychology as a bourgeois pseudo-science, and the initiation of its revival (Klicperová-Baker et al., 2020; Koczanowicz & Koczanowicz-Dehnel, 2021). During that time, other psychological disciplines in Yugoslavia, such as educational, developmental, work, and military psychology, also shown rapid growth and emancipation.

In order to analyze prevailing topics in Yugoslav psychology before 1990s, metadata for articles containing the term "YUGOSLAVIA" in the address field (AD) were downloaded from the *Web of Science Core Collection* and limited to psychology research area (SU). Additionally, all papers containing terms "YUGOSLAVIA" and "PSYCHOL\*" in address were also downloaded as many psychologists were publishing in other fields, such as linguistics, ergonomics, and pedagogy. The final set was consisted of 255 papers published between 1967 and 1991. Since most of the papers did not contain abstract nor keywords, the focus was put on the most prominent authors. The largest cluster of papers appears in the area of psycholinguistics and biliteracy at the University of Belgrade (Georgije Lukatela). Apart from the cognitive psychology, researchers from this university were also active in the fields of ergonomics, work environment, and traffic psychology (Staniša Milošević). Another prominent cluster of authors was consisted of psychologists from the University of Zagreb focused mostly on the subject of psychophysiology (Zoran Bujas and Dean Ajduković). Researchers at Slovenian universities published most of their papers in the fields of industrial psychology, cross-cultural studies, and neuropsychology. It is also worth mentioning that a significant proportion of papers in psychology were published by non-psychologists, e.g. psychiatrist Vladan Starčević (hypochondriasis), mathematician Vladimir Batagelj (psychometrics), and molecular biologist Dušan Kanazir (psychosomatics). Strong focus of Yugoslav psychologists on experimental and applied psychology is also supported by an earlier citation analysis which had used data from the first Yugoslav bibliometric database called *SocioFakt* (Šipka, 1995a). Most cited authors in the local context were those from the fields of statistics and psychometrics (Konstantin Momirović), personality psychology (Ante Fulgosi), and kinesiology (Smiljka Horga). Two additional results based on bibliometric analysis are also relevant (Šipka, 1995b). The first is that citation exchange among Yugoslav departments of psychology was generally low and the second is that two departments acted as a sort of hubs. Psychologists from Zadar, Rijeka, and Ljubljana were gravitating towards Zagreb, while the department in Belgrade was the source of influence to psychologists from Novi Sad, Sarajevo, and Skopje.

One specific characteristic of the Yugoslav society was the so-called *Workers councils* which formally implied working-class power and workers' control over enterprises. These councils were in fact under the full control of the Communist Party, while unions were false defenders of workers and mainly acted as organizers of travels and manifestations. Political system was organized as a "non-party democracy", since the Communist Party was renamed the Association of Communists, but communists had a total control over the media and political life. Although Yugoslav psychologists managed to remain mainly apolitical (Čorkalo Biruški, 2004), psychological research on working class and management, as well as the general political climate in the country, had to be in the spirit of the official policy and support the state regime (Kuzmanović, 1995). In relation to that, the first studies of authoritarianism yielded results showing that average scores on the *California F-scale* for Yugoslav population

were among the highest in the world (Rot & Havelka, 1973). Although these results were published, they were never discussed nor associated with the authoritarian political system. Nevertheless, the overall climate for the development and prosperity of psychological research and practice was generally positive. From the current point of view, it seems that the main obstacle did not come from the Yugoslav restrictive regime, but from the negative attitudes and even biases Western authors had towards research originating from Communist countries in general (Šipka, 1996).

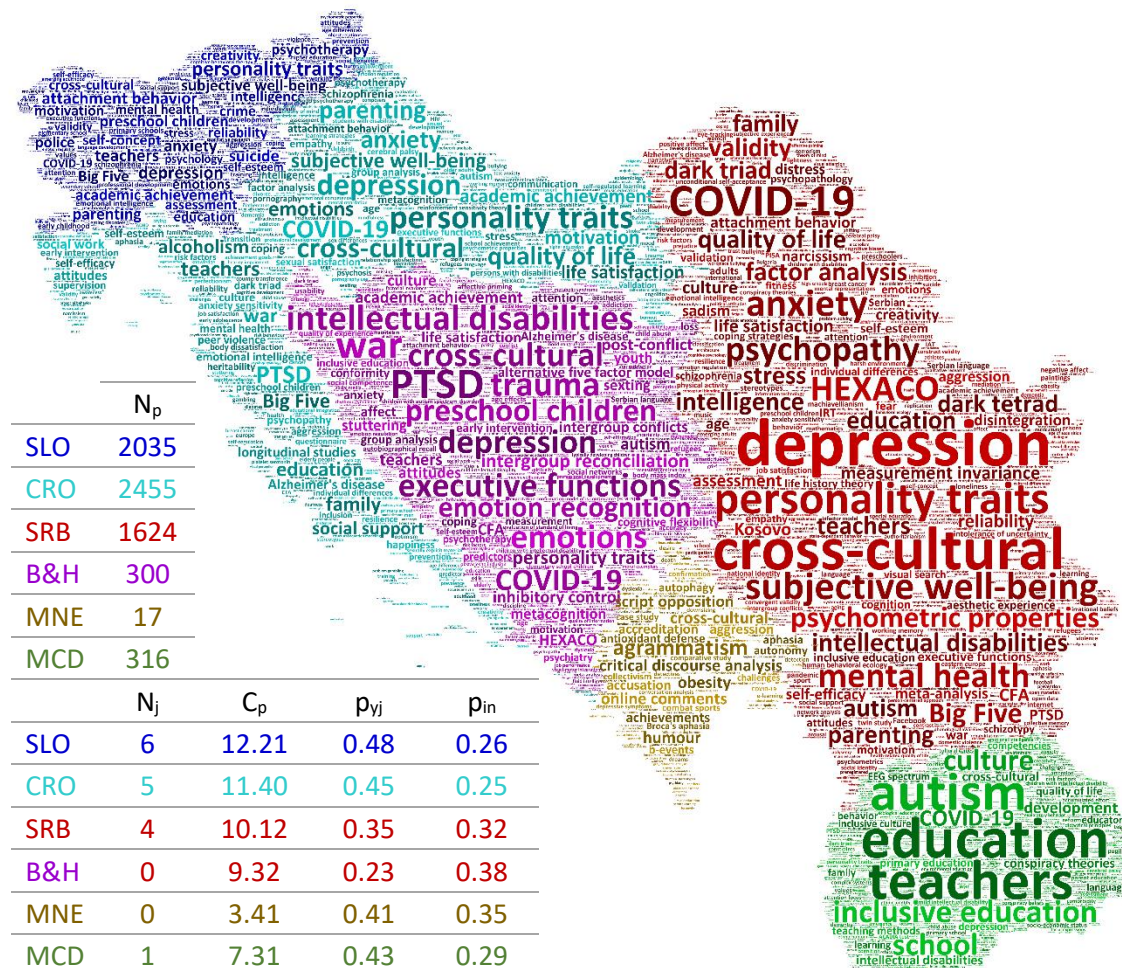
Yugoslav war coincided with the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the period of turbulent social changes and economic transition. This has largely influenced research orientation of Yugoslav psychologists and the move of psychology outside the laboratory (Čorkalo Biruški, 2004). Contrary to the Yugoslav era when research on social distance was considered controversial, nationalism and national identity became one of the prevailing topics in psychology (Ajduković, 2019). Discussions on the issues of ethnic distance has divided the professional public: one side assumed that pre-war data showing low distance among Yugoslav nations was the result of giving socially desirable responses in accordance with the official "Brotherhood and Unity" policy. The other side argued that the data were reliable and that the emergence of war could have been explained by media control and the influence of nationalist politicians who spread hatred and intense war propaganda. As an additional argument, this other side emphasized the high percentage of mixed marriages in multicultural settings, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Biro et al., 2004). The necessity to help people coping with post-war traumas has significantly boosted the development of community psychology. Bibliometric research shows that one of the most prominent changes in this period was the strengthening of the clinical psychology area (Milin, 1999). In general, post-war period in Yugoslav countries was characterized by the shift of psychological research from experimental and highly controlled settings, towards the more pragmatic analysis of human behavior in the context of emerging social issues.

### Current psychological research in the countries of former Yugoslavia

For the purpose of this review, bibliometric analysis was used to explore the knowledge domain of psychological research in the ex-Yu countries. Metadata on psychology papers (SUBJAREA(PSYC)) authored by authors from the former Yugoslav countries were retrieved from the Scopus database. The sample was composed of 6,373 papers published in the past 30 years. Author keywords from all papers were processed using the Python *WordCloud* package. Before the keywords cloud shown in Figure 1 was generated, several most frequent terms were removed from each dataset to improve the readability of the image. These include country names, term "gender", and terms "adolescents" and "students". Gender is obviously often used as a demographic variable, while the high frequencies of the two latter terms may suggest that significant proportion of research is based on convenient samples of (psychology) students. Size of the keywords shown on the map corresponds to their frequency, i.e. the number of papers in which they appear. The positions of the keywords within each country's state border are completely random. Although the analysis has covered the thirty-year period, most of the papers (88%) were published after 2005 and hence the map basically represents an overview of the current psychological research in former Yugoslav countries.

The map indicates that research topics are very diverse and that all psychological disciplines are covered to some extent. Relative keyword sizes suggest that various subjects are more or less equally represented in Slovenia and Croatia, while in the other countries specific topics prevail. Some of them seem to be common, such as depression, anxiety, personality traits, well-being (“life satisfaction”, “quality of life”), and education. Researchers are also very often involved (or very interested) in cross-cultural studies. On the other hand, several country-specific topics emerge, e.g. criminal psychology (“police”, “crime”) in Slovenia, social support and family issues in Croatia, and psychopathy (“dark triad”) in Serbia. PTSD is still a relevant topic in most countries although war-related issues (“PTSD”, “trauma”) are prevalent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is somewhat expected since the people of this country have probably suffered the most during the wars in the 1990s. Keywords cloud for Montenegro is not that informative due to the small number of papers, but it seems that psycholinguistic is the “hot” topic. In North Macedonia, prevailing research issues are (inclusive) education and autism. Although it became topical relatively recently, COVID-19 came up as a frequent subject in all countries, being proportionally most popular in Serbia.

Figure 1. Bibliometric features of psychological research in former Yugoslav countries<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> High resolution image is available for download at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19248386>.





ex-Yu countries in psychological research is generally very weak, with the slight exception of Croatia and Slovenia. Psychologists from ex-Yu countries most often collaborate with their colleagues from USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. Finally, the hub in the left part of the map indicates that international collaborations usually involve large multinational teams of researchers. Papers resulting from such collaborations are most frequently published in *Frontiers in Psychology* as the only scientific periodical in the top ten journals where Yugoslav psychologists publish their research visible in Scopus.

As a frame of reference, some bibliometric indicators were also calculated for seven countries of the former Eastern Bloc and shown in Table 1. Again, it is evident that the number of published papers highly correlates with the number of national journals indexed in Scopus. Polish psychologists have the highest absolute productivity, while papers published by Hungarian authors have the highest average citation rate. That is if we exclude Albania with only 68 psychology papers available in Scopus. When comparing these numbers, we should of course consider the size of each country and its population. In a relative sense, Slovenian and Croatian scientific productions in the field of psychology are the highest in the region.

*Table 1.* Bibliometric indicators of scientific production in psychology for seven countries of the former Eastern Bloc

	Albania	Bulgaria	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia
$N_p$	68	718	3305	4508	10260	3082	1473
$N_j$	0	0	6	6	19	7	1
$C_p$	20.69	18.42	11.77	18.77	11.14	11.03	9.68

*Note:*  $N_p$  - number of psychology papers in Scopus published from 1992 to 2022,  $N_j$  - number of national psychology journals indexed in Scopus,  $C_p$  - papers' average citation rate

## Current psychological practice in the countries of former Yugoslavia

The basic prerequisite for successful practice is quality education. Currently, there are more than fifteen accredited study programs in psychology at state universities in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Most of these programs are aligned with the Bologna process demands meaning that all students are required to participate in various research projects and obtain practical experience in psychological skills and techniques. In 2017, five universities in Croatia and three in Slovenia became eligible to issue *EuroPsy* certificates for their BA and/or MA psychology programs. Three psychology departments are currently listed on the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*: Ljubljana (301 – 400), Maribor (501+), and Novi Sad (501+). Students at all universities can specialize in various psychological subfields and prepare for work in schools, companies, medical institutions, and research centers. Apart from that, many students opt to start their private psychotherapy or HR businesses.

Psychologists from the ex-Yu countries have the opportunity to improve their expertise and get in touch with the current trends in psychology by attending many regional scientific and professional conferences and meetings. *Congress of Psychologists of Serbia*, which will be held for the 70<sup>th</sup> time in 2022, was one of the first meetings that managed to bring together psychologist from the former Yugoslavia after the fall of Milošević's regime. Psychologists from the Yugoslav region are also regularly taking part in *Ramiro and Zoran Bujas Days*



organized every two years by the Department of Psychology in Zagreb and the Croatian Psychological Society, *Days of Psychology* in Rijeka, *Empirical Research in Psychology* in Belgrade, *Days of Applied Psychology* in Niš, *Current Trends in Psychology* in Novi Sad, and many others.

Psychological practice in all ex-Yu countries is regulated by appropriate laws and codes of ethics and is supported by various professional bodies. Recent COVID-19 crisis has shown the full potential of these associations since they have provided a framework for psychologists to team up and address the mental health needs of the community. For example, in Slovenia, *Slovene Umbrella Association for Psychotherapy* and *Slovenian Psychological Association* organized a dedicated service and a telephone line for psychological support. Croatian *Psychological Chamber* in cooperation with the *Croatian Psychological Society* launched a counseling telephone network and organized several education seminars for psychologist who were willing to participate in protecting and treating citizens' mental health. Macedonian *Association for Applied Psychology* and the *Association of Young Psychologists* formed an initiative called *Together FOR mental health*. *Serbian Psychological Society* is maintaining the list of licensed volunteer psychologists who can be consulted for free.

Similarly to many other (post) transitional countries, psychological practice in former Yugoslav republics are not without problems. One of them is that psychologists' specialization and expertise are not fully acknowledged at some working positions. For example, in countries where the governance of school systems is highly centralized, the role of psychologists in educational institutions is often defined more broadly as "guidance counsellor" (Slovenia) or "professional associate" (Serbia, Croatia, and North Macedonia) (Popov & Spasenovic, 2020). This means that psychologists are more often involved in activities related to the realization of school programs than in providing mental health care and supporting pupils in their personal development. Furthermore, it is not uncommon that pedagogists or social workers take the role of psychologists in educational institutions. This issue dates back to the Yugoslav era and could partially explain the initial strong influence of empirical psychology and "isolation" within psychological laboratories as a way to emancipate psychology as a discipline separate from philosophy and pedagogy (Čorkalo Biruški, 2004).

Similar situation is evident in medical institutions where psychologists are not only rendering their services under the psychiatrists' supervision but are often treated as their assistants. These are just some of the reasons why the laws on psychological practice are in the process of being changed (e.g. in Croatia and Serbia) in order to define more precisely the conditions for performing psychological activity as a regulated profession, as well as the obligations and rights related to the professional training of psychologists. On the other hand, in some recently emerged areas of expertise with a much weaker tradition in Yugoslav psychology, such as human resources and career guidance, psychologists have the widest autonomy and full recognition of their work. This is why the specialization in industrial and organizational psychology is growing in popularity among psychology students.

Regarding the legislative related to psychological practice, the burning issue are the laws on psychotherapy. Except for Croatia where the *Law on Psychotherapy* was passed in 2018, former Yugoslav countries are still making valuable efforts to properly regulate this area of psychological work. The draft of the law in Slovenia is being prepared since 2018, and the

current draft of the Serbian law is being heavily criticized for monopolizing psychotherapy by the *Serbian Association of Psychotherapists* and, unlike the Croatian law, for marginalizing the role of universities and academic institutions in educating future psychotherapists.

## Epilogue

Even when they were part of the same federation, former Yugoslav countries had their own and mostly separate courses of development of psychological research and practice. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, these courses have only drifted further away. It should be pointed out though that during the wars both psychology as a profession and individual psychologists took a bold and principled stand against the nationalist regimes and national conflicts. For example, besides participating in various anti-war and pro-democracy NGOs and activities, psychologists in Serbia had founded the *Most (Bridge)* group whose aim was reconciliation among the Yugoslav people. Unfortunately, current psychological research shows that the willingness to reconcile is still rather low, even among the younger generations (Milas et al., 2007; Niškanović & Petrović, 2016). This is regretful since the reconciliation is the absolute starting point for progress and prosperity of the Yugoslav region. Now, more than ever before, former Yugoslav countries share the common destiny of all small countries and small sciences in struggling with the challenges of globalization. These challenges include but are not limited to the access to international funding sources, professional mobility, attracting foreign students, and strengthening the connections between science and industry. By constantly emphasizing their dissimilarities, ex-Yu researchers and science policy makers have neglected the possible advantages of their common background, in the first place the fact that they speak practically the same multicentric language. A revealing example is the case of Yugoslav regional journals. By favoring English language and the promotion of local journals in international databases, psychological research has lost its national reach and the connection with local psychology practitioners. At the same time, ex-YU journals, with a few exceptions, have failed to achieve full affirmation, at least when compared to the other successful examples such as journals from the Spanish speaking area (Pajić & Jevremov, 2014). Nevertheless, it may be concluded that psychology is now a fully established profession and scientific discipline in all ex-Yu countries. Psychologists have captured the deserved attention both by the public and by the policy institutions and are actively participating in all relevant aspects of social life. The efforts put by the pioneer psychologists from the Yugoslav era was not in vain.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are not available for sharing due to Elsevier's terms and conditions. Figure 1 is licensed under the CC-BY 4.0 license and is available for download from Figshare.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no relevant affiliations or financial involvement with any organization or entity with a financial interest in or financial conflict with the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript.

## Ethics declaration

This study did not require direct contact to human participants nor an ethical approval. No personal data on researchers, such as their names or IDs, were used.

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