

A REAL SAY

ON **SERBIA-US** RELATIONS



SERBIA FORGING
CLOSER TIES WITH
THE WEST

AMERICANISATION
AS A WAY OF LIFE



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The spread of American cultural influence and the exchange between American and European cultures dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when parts of today's Serbia were visited by William Frederick Cody, better known as "Buffalo Bill", a veteran of the American Civil War (1861-1865), buffalo hunter and showman. As part of his tour of European theatres he visited the towns of Kikinda, Zrenjanin, Pančevo and Vršac. The travelling show, complete with horses and cowboys and Indians aroused a local interest in the Wild West, which had already been piqued by the novels of Karl May.

Following the arrival of the western, the Kingdom of Serbia opened to a new influx of American culture in the form of comics, jazz and various dances, such as the Charleston, Shimmy and Foxtrot. In addition to music, films made in Hollywood also came to be popular in local cinemas. [Jazz](#) became a widely known and popular style of music in Belgrade in the mid-1920s and was played at the [leading venues](#) of the time (Mjuzik hol, Siti, Auto klub, Džokej klub, Kleridž, palata Luksor, and the Srpski kralj, Ekselzior and Palas hotels). During that period, the first jazz orchestras formed, including Jazz Kapela, Todo-džaz, Laci-džaz, Jig-jazz, Eldorado and others. Moreover, the greatest pop culture diva of the day, [Josephine Baker](#), performed in Belgrade in 1929.

According to music critic, journalist, author and editor, Petar "Peca" Popović, gramophone records made it possible for all kinds of music to make it to every corner of the globe – the first recording of a jazz concert took place in New York in 1917 and the first jazz concert was held in Belgrade as early as 1923. This is just one example of how [Serbia was, during that period, keeping pace with world events](#). Belgrade was, at that time, exposed to American popular culture through its cinemas, dance halls and fashions at the same time as other Anglophone and continental European cities. Yugoslav society was not, however, merely a passive recipient of American culture, with a lasting influence and contribution in the other direction being made by men of science such as Nikola Tesla and Mihailo Pupin and the painter and poet, Milena Pavlović-Barili (who painted portraits of, among others, Rudolph Valentino and Josephine Baker).

The reactions of some conservative intellectuals to these new phenomena were negative indeed, but amenable attitudes towards American culture won out. The acceptance of Western influence was perhaps ensured thanks to the Serbian royal family and the country's political establishment. This could perhaps be explained with reference to the role played by the United States, led by president Woodrow Wilson, in supporting the creation of Yugoslavia due its having been an ally in the First World War and, from 1917, the provision of aid to the South Slavic peoples amounting to one million dollars per month, intended to assist the country's recovery from enormous casualties and material damage suffered during the war.

Historians, musicologists and art historians claim, however, that the Americanisation of European societies did not, at this early stage, see much interference by the American state. The institutionalisation of public diplomacy – the spread of American influence through American culture, science and technological achievements – peaked only during the Cold War. [According to the writings of Radina Vučetić Professor of General Modern History at the Philosophical Faculty, University of Belgrade](#), of the History Department at the Philosophical Faculty, University of Belgrade, and author of "Coca-Cola Socialism", this was spurred on by the adoption of the US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (also known as the Smith-Mundt Act), which enabled the US government to establish and enhance relations with other countries and peoples through public diplomacy, culture and education. Henceforth, public diplomacy became one of America's foreign policy priorities.



The adoption of this act coincided with Yugoslavia's split with the Soviet Union, after which it turned more towards the West. Tito aspired to become an independent agent in international politics and the Yugoslav leadership sought support for that goal. Washington's support for Tito's "no" to Stalin was a signal to other countries behind the Iron Curtain to follow in Yugoslavia's footsteps and that a way out of the Soviet camp was possible. In 1950, in an effort to secure support for Yugoslavia in Congress, president Harry Truman claimed that Yugoslavia was, "[...] a country whose strategic location made it of direct importance to the defence of the North Atlantic area [...]". Four years later, by signing the Balkan Pact with NATO members Greece and Turkey, Yugoslavia became the only socialist country in the security framework of the West.

America did not build upon and increase its power during the 20th century only on the back of a powerful economy and military but also through the "export" of American culture, values and way of life. An important role in winning the "hearts and minds" of nations and countries across the world was played by the US Information Agency (1953-1999), which led American cultural and educational foreign policy. Relying on soft power, America worked continually on improving relations with Yugoslavia but also on ensuring that Yugoslav society would accept American culture and the American way of life – leading to changes in public opinion and social consciousness.

The Information Agency was in charge of the key institutions of American propaganda, including the Voice of America radio service – which served as a source of information for those on the other side of the Iron Curtain, covering the events, thoughts and lives of their counterparts in the West – as well as American information centres tasked with distributing magazines, books and films and organising exhibitions, English language courses and cultural and educational exchanges. Voice of America radio was first heard in Serbo-Croatian in 1943 and, after the war, all of Yugoslavia could hear, "Washington here, Voice of America, this is Grga Zlatoper" – a Yugoslav journalist and post-war newsreader. In addition to informative content, the sounds of jazz and rock and roll echoed from the radio or from vinyl records, some of which would have been borrowed from the American Reading Room (opened in Belgrade in 1945).

American soft power was able to spread in part thanks to the biggest stars of the jazz scene, who from the mid-1950s performed in Belgrade: Dizzy Gillespie (1956), the Glen Miller Orchestra (1957), Louis Armstrong (1959), Ella Fitzgerald (1961), Cole Potter (1964) and Woody Herman (1966). Since 1971 the [Belgrade Jazz Festival](#) has been organised annually with the participation of Duke Ellington, BB King, Miles Davis, Jimmy Owens, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles and others.

Closer ties with the West were also reflected in the [daily lives](#) of the men and women of former Yugoslavia, who listened to jazz and rock and roll, wore Levis and Converse All Stars, drank Coca-Cola, ate hamburgers, chewed gum, smoked Marlboros and consumed a host of other products that were sold in supermarkets modelled on those from America. Generations of young people grew up watching the Disney heroes, Micky and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck and others, while the grown-ups repeated lines from American movies, such as *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Rear Window*. From the famous book, *Leksikon YU Mitologije*, novelist and literatus, Vladimir Arsenijević, singles out the children's counting rhyme – *ema, esesa, esesa, pipija* – as an example of American influence. The rhyme was widely popular amongst children, particularly girls playing jump rope, who were completely unaware that it originated as a memory aid for spelling Mississippi. American influence is ubiquitous even today, given that current generations also rely on American cultural and technological achievements in the form of IBM computers, Microsoft software, Apple products, hip-hop music, video games, social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and the wide-spread use of foreign words – i.e. the Anglicisation of spoken language.

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The Tito-Stalin split also created an opportunity for many Yugoslavs to acquire scholarships through various American programmes and hence play an important role in transforming and modernising Yugoslav society, forming the scientific and cultural elite, and in supporting the acceptance of American values in a socialist country. On the back of international educational exchange programmes run by the American government and the activities of the leading American foundations and scholarships (the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Scholar Program, the Leader's Exchange Program and other), thousands of the selected scholarship students acquired practical experience by studying, lecturing and conducting scientific research in America and becoming acquainted with various aspects of American life. After West Germany, the largest number of European Fulbright scholars came from Yugoslavia – testament to the country's importance for American foreign policy.

Although rock is an American invention, the Yugoslav music magazine, *Džuboks*, published in May 1966, was the first rock magazine in the world. Moreover, avant-garde American plays and troupes, such as the Broadway musical, "Hair", held premieres in Belgrade. It became quite commonplace to see world famous actors and actresses, such as Orson Welles, Kirk Douglas, Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Clint Eastwood or Jack Nicholson, on the streets of Belgrade or other Yugoslav cities. These stars would come to take part in the international film festival (Fest) or to make movies in this socialist state. "In some things we were equal with the rest of the world and we were part of it even before the internet, when that was a lot harder. Here we had people who were lighthouses – they saw light and sent it out further. Today that's practically unthinkable," Petar "Peca" Popović stressed.

American influence was not evident only in [popular culture](#) but also through changes to high culture – above all the creation of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival ([Bitef](#)) and the establishment of the Museum of Contemporary Art. As a festival at the crossroads of East and West and a meeting place for different cultures, but also through the hard work of Mira Trailović and Jovana Ćirilova, Bitef contributed to the geopolitical position of Yugoslavia and put Belgrade on the map, in terms of both theatre and politics.

Artist and Ford Fellow, [Miodrag B. Protić](#), founded the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art in 1965, modelled on the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), which went on to host exhibitions of American abstract expressionism and pop art. Art historian, professor and curator, Branislav Dimitrijević, claims that American influence in high culture was not quickly and easily accepted due to resistance from local creators. According to him, most Yugoslav artists failed to properly understand American art and saw it as "shallow", believing that the home of art was Paris, rather than New York. However, the pop art movement did significantly influence modern art in the region and the work of "Yugoslav artist Dušan Otašević had something reminiscent of American pop art and deviated from academic rules of the time. Except the influence was not taken on in its original form, instead it was changed and adapted to the local context and, in that way, gained a local function", Dimitrijević states.

All of these examples indicate strong ties between Yugoslavia and America in the fields of science, education, art and culture, which are accompanied by intensive political and economic ties, thanks to which Yugoslavia could consider itself on a par with the most developed Western states.

The end of the Cold War led to the break-up of the Soviet Union, the start of democratisation for the states and societies of the former Eastern bloc and their inclusion in the Euro-Atlantic community. As the "victor" against communism, the United States came to lead a new, unipolar world. In contrast, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars, followed by international isolation and sanctions, resulted in a reversal



of what had been relatively good and stable relations between Yugoslavia and America. The bombing of FR Yugoslavia in 1999 worsened relations further still and, during the conflict, the premises of the American Reading Room in Knez Mihailova were gutted. The building that once housed the American Reading Room now houses the Cervantes Spanish cultural centre yet, once diplomatic relations had improved, the United States opened the [American Corner](#) in the Belgrade Youth Centre (in 2006), as well as in other Serbian towns. The opening of the American Corner symbolises a renewal of relations between America and Serbia but also in the significance of public diplomacy as an arm of American foreign policy in the 21st century.

As America withdrew and reduced the number of programmes available to Serbian citizens, other countries such as China, Russia and Turkey learned the post-Cold War lessons and stepped up their presence in Serbia, using soft power in the same way America once had. Joseph Nye, American political scientist and the originator of the idea of soft power, notes that American power in the 21st century is declining due to the loss of legitimacy of US government policies in the eyes of people around the world but also due to the declining importance of and investment in public diplomacy. This has resulted in growing anti-Americanism on a global scale. Therefore, the reduced importance of and investment in public diplomacy in America raises a much greater question than the US budget or American foreign policy – the question of American power and supremacy in the 21st century. This is why Nye thinks soft power is more important now than ever and recommends greater investment in public diplomacy. Historian, Radina Vučetić, concludes that Serbian-American relations would certainly benefit from a fresh renewal and a change like this could contribute to a change to how America is perceived globally and also to the creation of a new hierarchy of great powers for the 21st century.

This analysis was conducted using the academic papers and conclusions of the “Mi smo svet” public debate, organised as part of the A Real Say on Serbian-American Relations project, which is implemented by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in partnership with the Faculty of Political Sciences University of Belgrade and supported by the US Embassy in Serbia.

