

*The Age of Skin* collects, in chronological order, essays written by Dubravka Ugrešić between 2014 and 2018.

Born and raised in what was then still Yugoslavia, Ugrešić is now based in Amsterdam, and many of the pieces look at the life of the migrant(/refugee/exile) -- not just her own experiences, but also others', especially other Eastern Europeans. For her and other Eastern Europeans, the collapse of the Soviet system and hegemony marked an abrupt breaking point -- compounded in the case of Yugoslavia by the extended period of violent national break-up that followed. Among the many issues that she returns to repeatedly is this continuing, roiling aftermath of what remains a state of transition rather than an actual, complete moving on, as, for example:

I thought about how Yugoslavia, the country where I was born and grew up, has still not been properly laid to rest.

Many who have moved westwards (or, as she repeatedly notes, to Turkey, a place of more opportunity during much of this period than some of the corners of South-East Europe ...) have adapted in many ways; the example of Bulgarian cleaner Meliha from [Invisible Europe](#) is a typical one of someone who successfully if almost inadvertently becomes rooted in a new environment. Meliha's Dutch earnings have allowed her to buy a house and an apartment back home in Bulgaria -- but with her limited education and command of Bulgarian (and Bulgarian-Turkish background, a complicating factor) Ugrešić wonders why she would be drawn back to the place; surprised by the Dutch fluency she has acquired, Ugrešić realizes:

Meli's self-decolonization happened in language, through language, thanks to language. This is why I am beginning to think she will never go back. Where can she go back to ? A native language where the best she can do is stutter ?

Throughout, and with many of the people she encounters, Ugrešić describes a sort of *Ostalgie* -- a nostalgia for the homeland, and for the familiar, including the familiar (Communist) system. That the Communist system was, in almost all respects, a failure is beyond doubt, but, as she notes, the paternalistic state provided a sense of security -- one that many abruptly lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that is now often much-missed. How deeply ingrained it is is shown already early on, in a brief flash-back to 1982, when she describes visiting Brighton Beach with a Russian writer, where:

Soviet émigrés waited, and were glad to wait, in long lines out in front of little shops run by fellow Soviet émigrés, thrilled to stand there chatting with their compatriots, just like in the old days, the forever lost Soviet times.

In contemporary Amsterdam, Ugrešić herself ventures to a local place where Croatian specialties are found -- sold by a dubious couple out of their apartment; Ugrešić is particularly good in her description of experiences that don't turn quite out as expected, and the scenes here are masterful in their casual observation.

Ugrešić repeatedly notes the failures of much of Eastern Europe to become more recognizably Western; instead, much seems sunk and sinking back into the old-familiar:

Zagreb is slowly sliding into an East European, communist era urbanity. Or perhaps today, now that Communism is no longer with us, the urbanity of Eastern Europe is more noticeable ?

Worse, yet, seems the embrace of the worst of both possible worlds -- most notably in a noxious nationalism, a part of which is also distinctly anti-cultural. She finds: "The catastrophic plummet in educational standards began with the collapse of Yugoslavia", the new freedoms marking, in this and many other respects, a turn for the worse. Visiting spas, she describes a stay at one now Russian-owned one in Slovenia from where she reports:

While watching Russian TV, I discovered that the hard-core, censored, Soviet Communist television was incomparably better in quality than today's "uncensored" variety. Today, as from everywhere else, raw uncensored stupidity seeps from Russian TV channels.

Repeatedly she (re)turns to the former Yugoslavia and the troubling forgetting and re-interpreting of history, a militant nationalism rearing its ugly head in everything from blind football (soccer) enthusiasm to the removal of Yugoslavian statues honoring the heroes of those times, as: "An army of unqualified historians is toiling today, erasing anti-fascist history and legalizing revisionist historical versions".

Nationalism at its most ethnic-obscene -- as in regarding the 'Serbians' who long lived in 'Croatia' (and vice-versa, etc.) -- and the related anti-immigrant sentiments are also repeatedly addressed, despite how devastating such attitudes (and the official policies concerning them) have proven to be in these struggling East European nations. As Ugrešić suggests, it's all of a piece; it's as if the locals are: "not people but cogs in the machine of destruction, the machine of self-destruction".

Ugrešić also considers the role of, and attitudes towards, women, and women writers in particular, in several pieces -- one even titled [The Scold's Bridle](#). Here as elsewhere, her report is not one of loud anger but rather matter-of-fact anecdotes, the absurdity of the treatment she's received and the facts she mentions perfectly sufficient to make crystal clear how ridiculous (yet also deep-seated) the situation is.

Ugrešić's pieces are in her familiar style, wending through various anecdotes, personal reminiscences, and observations -- rarely in great detail, but getting to the heart of matters, and often circling back to an example or person in the same piece. Although much she discusses includes the outrageous, her tone and presentation remain controlled -- not dispassionately neutral (her position is usually perfectly clear) but anything but screaming with the frustration one can well imagine many of these things eliciting. Her sense of humor -- often near-deadpan --, and the many far-flung examples -- including literary and other cultural ones -- also contribute to making for consistently engaging essays.

Ugrešić mentions having long tried: "to dodge the label 'Croatian writer,' or 'Croatian writer who lives in Amsterdam'", but as she also shows in many of these essays: "this sort of tattoo is almost impossible to remove". Ethnic/national identity-categorization proves to be incredibly hardy -- and, as she both shows and suggests, remains one of the things that continues to undermine the European experiment, the possibility for true continental and societal advancement (and, of course, it is much the same elsewhere in the world, especially now, when we have seen a resurgence of ethnic-nationalist politics). Ugrešić has -- at least outside Croatia ... -- become an international writer, but as these pieces also prove, becoming and being perceived as a global citizen has once again become more difficult in a world that is once again narrowing and shrinking along ethnic and national lines.

Ugrešić is always worth reading, and *The Age of Skin* is certainly yet another worthwhile collection.

