

Kosovo: Dismantling Yugoslavia

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Belgrade's take-over of the autonomous province of Kosovo nine years ago was the first blow to the system of constitutional balances inherited from the Tito era and marked the rise to power of Slobodan Milosevic. The second was the constitutional change to the status of Serbs in the Croatian Republic after the election of Franjo Tudjman, leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), as president of Croatia in 1990. The third was the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, which was followed by the outbreak of wars of ethnic cleansing in Croatia and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The murderous onslaught of the Serbian militia in Kosovo, which was intended to "eradicate" the drive towards independence in the province, may have opened a new chapter in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The threats of NATO intervention and the agreements reached with Slobodan Milosevic - which run counter to the Kosovar Albanians' demands for self-determination - have by no means closed this chapter and stabilised the area. The president of Yugoslavia in its third incarnation [1] (as a federation of Serbia and Montenegro) has committed himself to de-escalation under the supervision of OSCE observers against a background of considerable political uncertainty. His opponents have won power in Montenegro, and he is forced to contend with the presence in the enlarged Serbian government of the proto-fascist Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj.

The Serbs have begun to withdraw their paramilitary forces. And, with winter fast approaching, the Albanian population seem to have returned to their villages en masse. But their security is not guaranteed, nor is it certain that their homes will be rebuilt in the near future. Most important of all, there is no guarantee that negotiations on the status of Kosovo will be held and brought to a successful conclusion. The promised autonomy (within Serbia) is precisely what the Kosovo Albanians have been boycotting for almost ten years by means of peaceful but determined resistance. The Kosovo Liberation Army (known by its Albanian initials as the UCK) has already announced that it will not give up the fight for independence, which could mean protracted guerrilla warfare. Unless all the communities in the province are given equal rights, this new theatre of war in the Balkans could flare up again. It would have an explosive effect on the fragile republic of Macedonia (where the Albanians, who make up 25 % to 40 % of the population, are demanding recognition as a national community). It could also upset the precarious balance in Bosnia-Herzegovina and accelerate the disintegration of the present Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, from which Montenegro is increasingly seeking to detach itself.

The Yugoslav jigsaw puzzle is coming apart piece by piece, and there is no end in sight. In this protracted process of decomposition, the "international community", instead of putting the fire out, has actually been fanning the flames. New states that declared their independence were recognised, under pressure from Germany, without sufficient negotiation and, above all, without any attempt to deal systematically with the national issues involved. This failed to prevent the outbreak and spread of war in the region. While NATO intervention and the 1995 Dayton accords led to a cease-fire in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they also set the seal on the ethnic cleansing that had already taken place. And the governments now in power have every reason to prevent the hundreds of refugees from returning to their homes.

Former Yugoslavia has disappeared, leaving in its place a patchwork of fragments. The spiralling disintegration can be viewed in two ways. In the early stages of the crisis, in 1990-93, the favourite

theory in Belgrade was that of a conspiracy between Germany and the Vatican. It is public knowledge that the secession of Slovenia and Croatia was strongly encouraged in those quarters, but this does not explain why people voted for independence in the referendums held in both republics. The conspiracy theory explains nothing - neither the economic, moral and political crisis of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was blatantly obvious throughout the 1980s and paralysed the federal institutions, nor the specific conflict in Kosovo, which runs through the whole of Yugoslav history.

The opposite approach recognises only causes within the former system. On this view the "international community" can be criticised only for intervening too little and too late, and the Yugoslav crisis is explained by factors foreign to "civilised" Europe. The theory of inter-ethnic hatred - of tribes tearing each other apart for centuries - is one variant of this approach, in which all the protagonists are equally to blame. The other variant puts the whole blame for the crisis and the war on the "Serbo-communist aggressor". In both cases the communist regime is seen as having, at best, kept the lid on nationalist aspirations. At worst, as having fostered nationalism and ended up feeding off it. The Tito regime is supposed to have "forced" the peoples of Yugoslavia to live together. According to this line of thinking, the crisis of the socialist system and the achievement of political pluralism simply induced the bureaucrats of the former single party (now split up among the various republics) to exchange their "communist self-management" clothing for nationalist attire. When the suppressed hatreds rose to the surface, the whole system fell to pieces. This interpretation appears to have the merit of consistency. But simplified (not to say simplistic) views of the past shed little light on present difficulties.

Both during the second world war and in the present period, inter-ethnic violence was rooted in policies aiming at building ethnically exclusive nation states on the ruins of the first and second Yugoslavia. How are we to explain the failure of these policies in the first instance and their resurgence and victory in the second?

A first obvious difference is that of context. The fascist or collaborationist regimes in power in the states that resulted from the break-up of the first Yugoslavia underwent occupation by the Axis powers - Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) seized on this unifying factor by organising a national liberation struggle on the whole territory of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s there was no common external enemy. Germany was attractive in Slovenia and Croatia but seen as a hereditary enemy in Serbia. Nor, with the advent of Gorbachev, was there any longer a risk of Soviet intervention.

But the cohesion brought about by the struggle against an external enemy is not sufficient to explain why, in 1945, nationalist policies were defeated and a second Yugoslavia was established, whereas in 1990-91, the Yugoslav project backed by Ante Markovic, a Croatian liberal and head of the last federal government, was rejected at the polls in the constituent republics.

Clearly, the elections that brought the CPY to power after the second world war were not genuinely pluralistic. They were boycotted by opposition candidates who feared they were rigged. But it is hard to imagine how, after the terrible fratricidal clashes of the war, the CPY could have imposed the establishment of a second Yugoslavia against the majority will of the peoples concerned, given the collapse of the first Yugoslavia, which had been dubbed a "prison of the peoples". The idea is all the more absurd as the Communist Party itself, torn by factional struggles and banned since the early 1920s, had less than 10,000 members before the war. Neither the CPY's summary executions of real or alleged collaborators immediately after the war, nor the rapid imposition of single-party rule, alter the fact of the regime's initial and lasting popularity.

In practice, the joint multinational struggle against fascism was organised with a view to the

creation of a Balkan federation that would, as Tito had promised, include Albania. The establishment of the republics and the distribution of land to the peasants in the liberated areas laid the basis for a - by no means artificial - rapprochement between the peoples of the region. The introduction of workers' self-management after the break with Stalin in 1948 strengthened support for the regime in the factories and among the intelligentsia. The decollectivisation of agriculture in 1953, after a period of forced collectivisation under Stalinist pressure, helped to win over the peasantry.

Without an awareness of the progress achieved, both in the social and economic domain and in terms of the recognition of multiple national identities, it is impossible to understand several decades of history that made many people proud to be "Yugoslav" citizens, while retaining their national identity [2]. The economy grew rapidly up to the end of the 1970s, enabling a country on the fringe of the capitalist world and still 80 % agricultural on the eve of the second world war to escape from underdevelopment.

True, the whole edifice was both recent and fragile. In the absence of democracy, "official truth" stifled discussion of the darker episodes of recent history. The one-party system, and the lack of transparency and of consistency in economic decision-making, encouraged the growth of a decentralised bureaucracy that often diverted investment funds for its own purposes. (This was certainly the case in Kosovo.) The repression of social and national tensions led to an economic free-for-all. The increasing decentralisation of the economy without democratic checks and balances, and its opening up to the world market, cost the country very dear in the 1980s. While all regions underwent development, wide gaps in per capita income opened up between the different republics, whose population patterns and production structures varied considerably. This was the regime's most important failure.

In this situation, the sudden increase in foreign debt brought about by the jump in oil prices and the subsequent rise in interest rates in the early 1980s spelt the death of the system. In 1980 foreign debt reached \$ 20 billion, marking the beginning of a decade of crisis and conflict during which thousands of strikes broke out. The federal authorities were unable to force the republics, or the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, to shoulder their fair share of the debt. The richer regions considered themselves penalised by inefficient bureaucratic management designed to redistribute resources to less developed areas. The poorer regions complained that the rich regions were able to export large quantities of goods - and hence earn large amounts of foreign currency - because they, the poorer regions, were supplying them with cheap raw materials.

In short, although the causes of the crisis had little to do with inter-ethnic hatred, the crisis itself encouraged the rise of nationalist feeling. But Titoism had been more than an interlude. It had consolidated certain nationalities and protected them against the historically dominant nations that had been the only ones recognised in the inter-war period [3]. This protection was extended to the Kosovar Albanians from the 1960s onwards, although they had previously suffered a major blow when Belgrade had dropped the idea of a Balkan confederation after the break with Stalin. The abandonment of that project had again severed Kosovo's links with Albania, with which it had been united under Italian occupation.

Following the decentralisation of the mid-1960s, the Kosovar Albanians demanded recognition as a nation (rather than a national minority) [4]. They called for Kosovo to become a Yugoslav republic, arguing that they constituted a larger and more clearly defined national community than the Montenegrins, who already had the status of a nation and their own republic. The 1974 constitution granted the province of Kosovo (and Vojvodina) far-reaching autonomy that virtually gave it the status of a republic. It was granted a right of veto in federal bodies and its own political and cultural institutions, including a university in the Albanian language. This was the arrangement which Slobodan Milosevic overturned in 1989, on the grounds that the special status of Kosovo and

Vojvodina was “anti-Serbian”. In so doing, he ignored a historic opportunity to recognise the Kosovars as one of the constituent peoples of Yugoslavia at a time when their standard of living and the rights they enjoyed were superior to those in neighbouring Albania. Against this background, it is not surprising that Kosovars demonstrating against the Serbian authorities in 1990 carried portraits of Tito.

Tito’s consolidation of the republics of Bosnia-Herzegovina (with its three constituent peoples: Serbs, Croats and ethnic Muslims) and Macedonia [5], with its own official language, was not artificial either, as is sometimes alleged. But it was a fragile arrangement that depended on the stability of the Yugoslav federal framework. That is why the leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia fought desperately to maintain that framework. The unilateral declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia faced them with a tragic dilemma: to remain within a Yugoslavia dominated by Serbian nationalism or to declare independence and run the risk of intervention by Serbia and Croatia. (The reality of this threat was amply demonstrated by Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman’s jointly negotiated plan to carve up Bosnia-Herzegovina between them.)

Contrary to the claim that the resurgence of nationalism was exclusively neo-communist, several types of nationalism emerged. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic exploited the programme and slogans of Serb nationalism to bolster his leadership of the former communist party, which was renamed “socialist” at the beginning of the 1990s. But in Croatia nationalism was fostered mainly by anti-communist movements that often enjoyed support from abroad or from Croat emigré communities and were readily described as “democratic” on the strength of their respectably anti-communist credentials. In the early 1990s Franjo Tudjman’s main enemy was not Slobodan Milosevic. Behind the scenes, the two leaders connived to further each other’s schemes. Mr Tudjman’s real opponent was Ante Markovic, a Croatian liberal backed by the army, who continued to advocate a federal Yugoslavia.

It was Ante Markovic, then head of the federal government, and not - as is sometimes claimed - Slobodan Milosevic, who sent the army into Slovenia after the unilateral declaration of independence in June 1991. The upsurge of Serb nationalism had a knock-on effect in Slovenia and Croatia. But the nationalist leaders in these two republics were mainly concerned to strengthen their hold on power and control the strategy for privatisation and the transition to capitalism. While the Slovenian leadership had sided with the Albanians in Kosovo, they were no longer prepared to pour money into the region. They broke with Yugoslavia for the same reasons as the Czechs broke with Slovakia - to shed a millstone round their necks and pave the way for membership of the European Union. Like the Slovenes, the Croats claimed to be “real Europeans”, in contrast to the “Balkan” peoples. But it suited them that Kosovo should remain an internal affair of Serbia. That way, the question of the Serbs in Croatia could be treated as an internal affair of Croatia.

Ante Markovic’s party, and the liberals in general, failed to provide a viable alternative to backward-looking nationalism because the logic of the market which they championed was widening the gap between the regions and destroying the existing safeguards and burden-sharing arrangements. All the less developed republics were in favour of a Yugoslav system providing for the redistribution of wealth, whereas the rich republics of Slovenia and Croatia were against it. This conflict already existed under the communist self-management system, but it was accentuated by privatisation. Who was to benefit from the windfall - the federal authorities or the republics? The differences in the degree of development of the various regions encouraged the rich republics to opt for liberal economics, even if that meant going it alone. The prospect of joining the European Union also worked towards the disintegration of the system. The free-for-all of market competition encouraged the refusal to pay for others, especially in the framework of a redistributive budget. At the same

time, economic crisis and unemployment fostered hostility to the market and, above all, to “foreigners”.

Those are the underlying causes of the failure of Ante Markovic’s government in the face of the nationalist parties. They were compounded by the Western governments’ unwillingness to provide financial support. The United States wrote off most of Poland’s debt, and Germany paid DM 150 billion a year for unification from 1989 onwards. But Yugoslavia, in their view, had no strategic importance. It was worth neither a Marshall plan nor a war. As the multinational Yugoslav federation began to break up, the Western powers were confronted with major contradictions regarding the rights of peoples. Instead of trying to protect the most endangered communities, they sided with the dominant nations, backed by their “traditional” allies - Germany, in the case of Croatia and Slovenia, and France in the case of Serbia. They had no systematic approach to the entangled national issues in the Balkans. Previously, the issue of self-determination had been posed in the context of colonialism. Now it had arisen in a territory overlaid with successive conflicting patterns of earlier domination. Should precedence be given to the rights of peoples (in the ethnic or national sense) or to those of states? Should self-determination be equated with the establishment of a separate state? What rights should be granted to minorities, bearing in mind that those they had acquired under Tito were far in excess of the international norms laid down, for example, by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe?

The Serbian leaders defended the right of Serbs to live together in a state of their own but refused that right to Albanians. The Croatian leaders rejected the claims of the Serbs in Croatia to the very same arrangements they were themselves trying to secure for the Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Belgrade freely invoked the French centralist model to justify the abolition of autonomy in Kosovo, while Zagreb was widely applying the German principle of *Blutrecht* (nationality by ethnic origin).

The Western European powers are paying the price of their political cynicism. They sought to contain Serbian nationalism by strengthening the Croatian nationalists, who were given a free rein to “cleanse” Croatia of its Serbs. Slobodan Milosevic took advantage of this to turn Kosovo into an “internal affair”, while proceeding to carve up Bosnia-Herzegovina with his Croat opposite number. The harsh realities make a mockery of the Western governments’ declared aim of a peaceful, stable community of states in the Balkans. The failure to punish war criminals, the unjust treatment of national issues and the growing development gaps will generate lasting conflicts. The European Union itself has proved incapable of answering the two basic questions raised by the Yugoslav crisis and each successive conflict arising from the break-up of the Yugoslav federation: How can comparable standards of living be achieved in all the different countries, and by what system of individual and collective democracy should a multinational territory be administered?

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] There have been three entities called “Yugoslavia”. The inter-war version, which adopted the name “Yugoslavia” in 1929, was dominated by the Serbian monarchy. The second, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia over which Tito presided until his death in 1980, ended in 1991 with the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, followed by declarations of independence by Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia and Montenegro then proclaimed the third version, called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

[2] In Tito's Yugoslavia a distinction was made between "citizenship", automatically conferred on citizens of the federal state or one of the republics, and "nationality", i.e. membership of a nation (narod) or people in the ethnic/cultural sense, which was freely chosen by the individual from the list of constituent nations having the right of self-determination. An individual was thus both a Yugoslav and a Serb, a Yugoslav and a Croat, etc. In 1981, however, over a million people declared themselves to be of "Yugoslav" nationality.

[3] This applies particularly to the Macedonian nation (and language), which is denied recognition by Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek nationalists, and also to the Bosnian "Muslim" nation (Islamised Slavs). Today, to avoid confusion between Muslims as a nation and Muslims as a religion, the constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) distinguishes between "Bosniaks" (Muslims by nation) and "Bosnians" (citizens of BiH, including Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats as the main peoples).

[4] The term "national minority", perceived as degrading, was replaced by narodnost, which is often translated as "nationality". "National community" would be a more accurate rendering.

[5] Now called FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).