

THE DISINTEGRATION OF YUGOSLAVIA

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I read with interest and approve of Dejan Guzina's article about the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the March 2004 edition of *Federations* ("Why Yugoslavia failed", Vol. 4, No. 1). What the author says is entirely true, but for readers there still may be some omissions, which urges me to add some amendments. The causes of the disintegration of Yugoslavia can be basically divided into two parts, i.e. historical reasons and recent events. D. Guzina's article concentrates on the latter (especially on Yugoslav policy after the 1970s and its consequences), which are important and true, but they cannot provide a fully satisfactory explanation.

Views about the causes of the disintegration

Since 1991, a number of concepts have been formulated among the general public as well as in academic analyses about the break-up of the country. The first concept says that the causes were mainly external ones. According to this view, it was the ambitions of the Great Powers, especially Germany, about the redistribution of the spheres of interest in the Balkans that led to the "dismemberment" of Yugoslavia, or – as other versions of the same concept state – the fall of the Yalta system made it possible for the small Southern Slav nations to "break free from the strait-jacket of artificial Yugoslavia". The second explanation, however, tried to find the causes of the break-up due to the special conditions and traditions of the Balkans. The supporters of this concept considered the events to be another explosion of the "centuries-old and mutual" ethnic hatred, especially when they saw the cruel way of fighting the developed world had not been used to. The third view, based on the concept of the conflicts of civilizations, concentrates on the clashes resulting from the encounters of Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Islamic cultures.

Though all these explanations include some or more elements of truth, they are all oversimplifications. The fourth view can be considered to be a more serious one, which explains the events with the failures of attempts towards democratic transition. According to this concept (and D. Guzina's paper is similar to this) the merger of (post-) Communist authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism resulted in the failure of economic reform and political democratization, which proved to be fatal for the country. Finally, a fifth distinct view explains the disintegration of the Yugoslav state with the specific characteristics and "late" occurrence of the formation of the Southern Slavic nation. It says that the break-up of Yugoslavia was part of the transition process that involved the disintegration of multinational formations into nation states, which was a characteristic of the Central- and Eastern-European region in the 19th and 20th centuries from the perspective of the development of the state. In my view, the events could be explained best by merging the two latter concepts.

Dual identity and collective self-determination

The foundation of the Yugoslav state might seem contradictory to the trend of fragmentation described above, but it is so only at first sight. For Southern Slavs, their national development

and concept about the state were permeated by individual nationalisms (the distinct Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, etc. national feeling) and, for almost a century and a half after the 1840s, with Yugoslav integralism, an idea of historical unity and common fate (and, as many believed in the beginning, common national identity!) of the Southern Slavic peoples. Given the duality of the Southern Slavic national movements, the foundation of the state in 1918 was not contradictory to this trend, but it was based on the dual political accord of the parties. There was an external concession, which was indispensable for the foundation of the state: the Great Powers which had a decisive role in the Versailles peace treaty system considered Yugoslavia to be an integral part of the new European balance of power, that is why they supported its foundation. It is of similar importance that there was an internal concession (not unanimous consent, but an agreement which reached the necessary conditions) that they themselves needed a common state as in the given circumstances this was the best way to reach their national aspirations. Consequently, the foundation of the Yugoslav state can be seen as an act of collective self-determination of the South Slavic peoples.

Thus, the birth of Yugoslavia in 1918 was made possible by three factors. First, the interests of the entente, especially those of France. Secondly, the romantic Yugoslavism with its pan-Slavic roots, which was present in the Southern Slavic political elite, aiming at the unification and independence of the “Yugoslav nation” out of the “three tribes” (Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian) following the pattern of the Italian and German nation-state unities. The third factor was that the historical circumstances brought the political elites of the three nations together with joint interest: from the common state, the Serbians expected the possibility of the unification of the Serbs into one single state, while the Slovenians and Croats saw it as a means to halt Italian expansion as well as to suppress revolutionary movements.

But in a country with such ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious heterogeneity, consisting of regions with considerably different economic profiles and stages of development, the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenians (the others’ opinion hardly mattered) could not even agree about the constitutional foundations. Centralist vs. monarchist and federalist vs. republican views were in sharp divergence. Under these conditions, it was impossible to integrate the country with the government’s centralizing-homogenizing policy filled with the spirit of Great Serbian nationalism. The continuous conflicts annihilated the romantic concept of Southern Slav national unity, and the Serbian-Croatian agreement of 1939, which gave autonomy to the Croats, came too late to create a new basis. Less than 18 months later, in April 1941, the Second World War reached Yugoslavia, and the Nazi invaders could easily divide the country along the internal lines of fracture.

Tito’s federation

In 1945, Tito reorganized Yugoslavia as a federation of six republics. This was made possible not only by the consent of the Great Powers (that the anti-fascist coalition took a stand on the restoration of the Yugoslav state) but also by the fact that the German occupation had brought back the Southern Slavic nations’ common political interests and consciousness of unity. The Nazi’s “order” was not beneficial to anybody, not even to the Croats in the long run as it gave them only an illusion of independence. In the given circumstances Tito’s principles (i. e. the recognition of the Southern Slavic peoples as nations not as “tribes”; cooperation as a means of standing up against the invaders; the federative People’s Republic as the frames of living

together) became acceptable to both the Serbs (because it promised the restoration of independence and a state unifying all Serbs) as well as to the other (because it declared the equality of nations). Then, after 1948, the fear from Soviet imperialism became one of the most important pillars of interdependence.

However, the new system was not only a federal system, but also a state socialist regime. In the beginning the country was organized following the model of Soviet centralism, subordinating the constitutional order to the doctrines of socialism and “the unity of the Yugoslav working class”. Thus, Tito’s federation could only become a real framework for republican and provincial autonomies as a result of the Constitution of 1974, which followed a long decentralization process. But the Constitution linked the federalization with the refusal of economic and political reforms, with the restoration of the party state, and with a certain degree of discrimination of Serbia and Croatia, the two largest republics. It created inherent problems, and the change of the political system, with national self-determination as one of its guiding principles, made the relationship between the nations even more strained.

Nevertheless, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s it was not possible to restore the dual consent (among the Great Powers and in domestic policy) any more. After the fall of the bipolar world order neither of the Great Powers had vital strategic interests in the maintenance of Yugoslavia. Though it is true that in the beginning they both refused secessions, they did so because the West wanted an organized and predictable transition, and it was afraid (together with Moscow) that the disintegration might set a negative precedent. Internal consent had also broken up. After “experimenting” with several forms of state, the Southern Slavs had not found a long-term form of coexistence mutually beneficial to all of them because the decentralized forms had been perceived by the Serbs as disintegration, while the centralist form had been perceived by all the others as Great Serbian domination. Thus, the cyclically returning constitutional and economic conflicts had gradually undermined the idea of the unity of the Southern Slavs and even the workability of the state. From this perspective, the economic recession and the Kosovo crisis in the 1980s, and the “collective leadership” which led to governmental chaos played a particularly important role as they fuelled Great Serbian nationalism and created the Milosevic-phenomenon. It was Milosevic who, with his attempts to centralize the country, alienated the non-Serbian nations from Yugoslavia irreversibly.

The renewal of constitutional debates

Since instead of the unification of the Southern Slavic peoples the emergence of independent nations took place (i.e. unlike Western multiethnic democracies, the peoples of Yugoslavia defined themselves as separate nations, not as groups within one common political nation), it would not have been sufficient to “westernize” or adapt the Western model of democratic federation to save the Yugoslav state. To achieve that, the three most important nations, the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes should have had common goals which had the power to integrate. But they did not have these any more: as D. Guzina rightly notes, the last joint action of the elites of the three republics was to wreck the reform policy of the Markovic-government. One reason for the disappearance of common interest was the negative experience about the common state. But the changes in the international environment were also important as the Southern Slavs always perceived their relationship with each other and towards Yugoslavia through their relationship with the outside world. The new age in the world economy, the acceleration of the

European integration, the end of the cold war, and the break-up of the Soviet bloc inevitably brought on the agenda the question of the reason for and function of the existence of Yugoslavia. The views of Slovenia and Croatia were determined by the fact that with the disappearance of the old imperial aspirations external threat also vanished, and being more developed, more westernized and net contributor republics they were afraid that if they remain “locked up” in Yugoslavia, they might be left out of the processes of modernization and European integration. Consequently, first they voiced their wishes of decentralization and reform, and later, facing Milosevic’s aggression, their demands of regime change and independence. These, however, were in contrast with the unifying aspirations of the Serbs, who lived dispersed in four Yugoslav republics, and for the Serbs the main reason for the existence of Yugoslavia was that it could ensure the Serbian nation’s unity in a single state. And this aspiration was as legitimate as the other nations’ ambitions to be independent.

In fact, the Slovenes and the Croats wanted to live in their own sovereign republics, but they wanted to preserve Yugoslavia as a frame for economic and political cooperation. The Serbs, on the other hand, wanted to maintain the unity of Yugoslavia as a state, or they were ready to accept the sovereignty of the republics and the confederalization of the country only if the borders were modified, referring to the necessity to maintain the unity of the Serbian nation in a single state. These are well illustrated by the constitutional debates of 1990 and 1991, where, as D. Guzina points out, three alternatives were outlined: a federation, supported by the Serbians and Montenegro; a confederation, which was described in Slovenian and Croatian proposals; and a compromise of an asymmetrical (con)federation. The latter was promoted by the Bosnians and Macedonians as well as the Carrington Plan, the first international draft peace treaty. The reason for the failure of the agreement was not that a compromise was inherently impossible (since all parties were interested in maintaining some kind of a Yugoslav community), but the absence of any political will on the part of the decision-making protagonists of Yugoslavia, mainly the Serbian leaders. Serbia judged the balance of power to be favorable, and, as a result, instead of trying to reach a mutually acceptable compromise, it brought the conflict onto the arena of power politics with its unilateral dictates.

Disintegration with war

As the disintegration of Yugoslavia was not inevitable, neither was the fact that it had to happen as a result of a war and lead to a bloody break-up claiming 250 000 lives. It is true that as a result of the territorial mix of the Southern Slav nations, the principles of self-determination of the nations and of the states (republics) were contradictory. But this fact alone would not have led to war: whatever serious a source of conflict this discrepancy was, it was the Serbian nationalists’ judgment of the situation and Milosevic’s Machiavellism that made it really dangerous. The Serbian nationalists, who had superior strength, saw a good chance to achieve their maximum goals, even with a quick military victory, therefore they were ready to start a “preventive” war. This was in harmony with the Serbian President’s personal interests: Milosevic consciously deepened the conflicts so that he could legitimize his power with the “defense of the nation’s interests”. The aversions to the regime change in the Yugoslav People’s Army and its insistence on the resources of a country with a population of 23 million were not favorable for a peaceful development either. Another important factor was the emergence of nationalism among the non-Serbian peoples. These nations had been trying to find international support for their political ambitions since 1988, based on their moral superiority and appearing as “the victims of the Serbs’

national bolshevism”. And we must not forget the ambiguous responses of the great powers, which often deepened the crisis instead of resolving it. Such an event was the squabble about the recognition of the former republics of Yugoslavia in 1991, or the decision about the arms embargo, which was theoretically right, but it had not been thought over.

As far as Milosevic’s Small-Yugoslavia was concerned (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia proclaimed in 1992), this was, in fact, not the heir of historical Yugoslavism, but it was based on Great Serbian *raison d’état*. Its aim was to unite the different branches of Serbs in a single state, in contrast with the aim of old Yugoslavism, which was to unite all Southern Slavs. The adoption of the term Yugoslavia aimed to maintain the legal continuity in international and to create the possibility for the small Serbian states in Croatia and Bosnia to join (or “to stay in Yugoslavia” as they tried to legitimize it). Following the military defeats, the introduction of UN governance in Kosovo, and the reviving of Montenegro’s aspirations for independence (in spite of Milosevic’s fall in the meantime) sealed the fate of this state as well.