Why Yugoslavia failed

BY *DEJAN GUZINA*

Could Yugoslavia have been kept from breaking up by a different form of federal system? We will never know, but the structure it had under Tito's Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 laid the groundwork for conflict and separation. Tito tried to institutionalize his policy of "brotherhood and unity". But after his death the constitutional foundations of the Yugoslav state fostered the exact opposite: the separation of the Yugoslav population into ethnic groups.

Why didn't the Yugoslav federal system work? The basic defect was its inability to solve the paradoxical relationship between ethnicity and socialism, the two opposing principles of governing the multinational socialist state. Yugoslavia's 1974 Constitution is a perfect example of this paradox. It was prompted by yet another attempt of the communist old guard, led by Tito and his most trusted ideological ally, Edvard Kardelj, to solve the twin problems of the early 1970s:

- the re-emergence of nationalism in the country and
- the mounting pressures for political reforms.

Tito's image dominates a 1950 festival in Petrovec, 65 km northwest of Belgrade.

The second problem, the pressure for reforms, was brought about by rapid modernization and the rising expectations of the budding urban middle class in postwar Yugoslavia.

Two moves that failed

Tito's response to the burgeoning crisis at the time consisted of two moves: a series of purges and the decentralization of the economy with workers' self-management at the factory level. Both would have disastrous consequences.

The purges were bad enough. Tito's first move was a series of political purges of party reformists throughout the country. It started with crushing of the so-called Croatian Spring in 1971 and continued a year later with the ousting of Serbian Communist Party leader Marko Nikezic´, and his followers who were known for their support of liberalization of the economy and the state. Although less has been said in the West about this second purge, one of the most astute writers on former Yugoslav affairs, Croatian journalist Jelena Lovric´, maintains that it was perhaps even more detrimental for the future of Yugoslavia than the removal of Croatian "national liberals".

In Serbia, after 1972, more than 6,000 people lost their jobs in politics, the economy, the media and the cultural institutions. Their places were quickly filled with party *apparatchiks* loyal to old-fashioned communist values: the revolutionary role of the party, egalitarianism, cohesion, conformity, the rhetoric of brotherhood and unity and so on. What had started as a genuine modernization towards "socialism with human face" ended up as a Serbian version of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and prepared the stage for the development of a strong anti-liberal, populist option in Serbia in the 1980s.

Then came the economic changes. Tito's second move was to create a new federal economic structure for Yugoslavia. The idea was that a reformed self-management system could sustain high rates of growth, while decentralization would satisfy increasing demands for both genuine liberalization of the system and a greater regional say in decision-making. This program proved disastrous. The party failed completely to prepare the economy for a qualitatively new stage of modernization in the 1980s. Ethnic nationalism continued to gain ground while the only "success" proved to be a very effective prevention of the rise of democratic social movements that might cut across regional borders.

Why Tito's reforms failed

How did this happen? In theory, the new Constitution was founded on the dual sovereignty of the working people – the working class – and that of the nations and nationalities. The word "nationalities" was a reference to the substantial national minorities such as Hungarians and Albanians living in the Serbian provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. But the channels through which working people

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were supposed to enjoy their rights operated within republican and provincial structures. The result was that the authority of these structures nearly doubled at the expense of increasingly residual federal institutions. Tying self-management directly to the community of nations and nationalities – the republics and the provinces – nearly destroyed its role in asserting the rights of the working people.

This constitutional arrangement gave Yugoslav republican elites both the form and the substance of national existence and political power. The resulting changes in the opportunity structure in Yugoslavia radically undermined links between the republics and the federation. Lacking a multi-party system and the integrative forces of a market economy, regional leaders had no reason to look for advancement in the central government apparatus. Instead, they created new opportunities in their republics and provinces, within their respective ethnic contexts. At the same time, federal appointments came to be increasingly understood as "foreign"posts, the role of which was to further the "diplomatic" interests of the respective republics and provinces.

The economy crashes in the 1980s

Both the authority of Tito and Yugoslavia's international standing in a world divided by the Cold War served as brakes on the growing centrifugal forces in all Yugoslav republics. But Tito's death in 1980, followed by a severe economic crisis and fiscal collapse the next year, finally unleashed the disintegrative tendencies of the Yugoslav constitutional system. The effect of the politics of failed modernization can hardly be overestimated. The high standard of living in the 1970s came to an abrupt end in 1981 when Yugoslavs finally learned the truth about their economy.

Between 1974 and 1980, Yugoslavia borrowed 16,433 million US dollars from the IMF, western governments and a great number of western commercial banks. Inflation reached an annual rate of 45 per cent and unemployment rose to 800,000. Beyond the unemployment figures, nearly two million people became so-called technological surplus. By 1984, the standard of living had fallen back to the level of the 1960s. Under such conditions, the republican leaderships started blaming each other for the failures of Yugoslav economic and social policies. In doing so, they could only target the federal (by now really confederal) constitutional frame, since in practical matters their individual veto rights allowed them to pursue their own interests against those of other republics and provinces without fear of any repercussions.

Not surprisingly, the right of veto soon became understood as a basic right by each federal unit, no matter what kind of question was at issue. This had detrimental consequences for the legitimacy of the Federal Executive Council – the Yugoslav cabinet – because its decision-taking powers became dependent upon the decision-making processes at the republican level. In the late 1980s, this territorial arrangement deprived the last pro-Yugoslav federal government of Ante Markovic´ the capacity to act in any legitimate fashion. Even though enjoying a great popularity at the time in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, Markovic´'s government soon fell prey to the orchestrated campaign of the republican elites of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia to topple the government's program of economic and political reforms. This was the last orchestrated campaign in which Serbia could find itself on the same side with Croatia and Slovenia. Significantly, their joint dismissal of the Yugoslav government was carried out using the powers granted by the Constitution itself. One can argue that Yugoslavia was not murdered, but that it in fact committed suicide.

Enter ethnic nationalism

At the beginning of the 1990s, the country was already completely fragmented territorially, economically and ethnically. Powerful republican media outlets, especially local TV stations and dailies, "prepared" Yugoslav citizens to accept graffiti-like political slogans that were challenging the legitimacy of Yugoslavia: "Kosovo-Republic", "Slovenia, my country", "Bosnian spirit", "All Serbs in a Serbian Land", "Thousand years of the Croatian state", and "Vojvodinian identity".

Soon, these slogans led to three full-fledged competing models for the solution of the constitutional crisis in the country. In reality, they already represented disguised projects for creation of independent and sovereign nation-states. The models for Yugoslavia were:

- a confederation – proposed by Slovenia and Croatia;
- a federation – proposed by Serbia and Montenegro; and
- something in-between – proposed by Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Slovenian representatives were the first to articulate their vision of confederal Yugoslavia. Their proposal of "asymmetric federation" became known as a "confederal" model in the second half of 1990 when Croatians decided to support it. It rejected majority voting because of the Serbs' demographic dominance in Yugoslavia. Instead, the proposal adamantly defended the principle of consensus and the rights to self-determination established in the 1974 Constitution. The peculiar feature of the document was the presence of many references to Europe and the European Community with the absence of any references to Yugoslavia.

The Serbian and Montenegrin position was based on the idea that any notion of a confederal Yugoslavia would lead to full disintegration of the country, and reduce more than two million Serbs living in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the uncertain position of a national minority. So their proposal for a federal Yugoslavia emphasized principles of majority voting and citizens' rather than minority rights. Despite its apparent democratic phraseology, the Serbian and Montenegrin proposal did not take into account the cultural complexities and historic differences of the Yugoslav republics – Serbs would remain living together, but its majoritarian thrust made it anathema to non-Serbs. As in the case of the Croatian and Slovenian

proposal, it promoted the particular interests of one nation over the interests of the others.

The "third way" fails to appeal to all

The Bosnian and Macedonian presidents, Alija Izetbegovic´ and Kiro Gligorov, offered their proposals to the "Yugoslav public" on the eve of the wars in Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991. In this extremely tense situation, it is not surprising that they presented their program as a "third way" between the federal and confederal concepts of Yugoslavia already on offer. Accordingly, their "Platform on the Future of the Yugoslav Community" was based on the concept of dual sovereignty – those of republics and that of a federal centre which would have similar functions to those defined in the 1974 constitution. These principles were ensuring a single market, guaranteeing human and minority rights across the whole of Yugoslavia, and maintaining a common foreign and defence policy. In reality, their proposal was closer to the Slovenian and Croatian model in that it explicitly limited the right to national selfdetermination to those peoples who were already organized within existing Yugoslav federal units. Those living across republican borders (in effect, mainly Serbs in Croatia and Bosnian Serbs and Croats – or within republics such as Macedonian Albanians) would become national minorities, as in the joint Slovenian/Croatian confederal model.

So, at the end of 1990 and in 1991, it was obvious that Yugoslavia had reached a constitutional impasse. While the "third option" and the "confederal" model appeared to Serbian representatives as a road towards secession, "federal" Yugoslavia looked equally unacceptable to everybody else because of its potential centralist threats. This constitutional impasse was finally broken by unconstitutional means. Unfortunately, a relatively painless transition to democracy and a peaceful dissolution of a multinational federation were possible only where national and republican self-determination coincided.

In the case of former Yugoslavia, this condition was present only in Slovenia as the most ethnically homogenous republic in the country. In other cases, the dissolution of the one-party state would not only fail to open the door to democratic transformation, but would also bring a bloody end to Yugoslavia itself. Its geographic space would be divided among small nation states basing their identity on a narrow ethnic understanding of nationalism that perceived citizenship rights not as rights extended to each individual member of society, but as the collective rights of a particular ethnic group.

Lessons for the future

What lessons might be learned from the Yugoslav experience? The solution to the destruction of Yugoslavia's federation and the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was the creation of yet another federation, that of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the international imposition of certain power-sharing forms of government on Macedonia and Kosovo. To many Yugoslavs, this looked like trying to extinguish a fire by throwing oil on it! But there may still be time to save something from the fire. The international community has finally recognized that the problem of Yugoslavia was not its federal character or ethnic diversity but rather its authoritarian political structures and non-democratic traditions. Thus, the solution to former Yugoslavia's maladies has always been at hand – liberalizing and democratizing the federal political system. For former Yugoslavia it is too late, but one can hope that there is still a chance for Bosnia- Herzegovina and for Macedonia.

Even though federalism has been used as an instrument of ethnic conflict management in multinational states, it is not certain to what extent multinational federations and other forms of territorial and political decentralization can be implemented in the region. Despite the current international support for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia on the principles of federalism and compromise between ethnic communities, federalism may still not have a future in the region. One of the most unfortunate consequences of the war in former Yugoslavia has been the outright rejection by most people in former Yugoslavia not only of the liberal model of federalism but also of much less radical forms of territorial and political decentralization. Recent elections in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia seem to corroborate this claim. Nationalist parties are still attracting a substantive percentage of the population and thus remain a strong alternative to democratic parties in the region.

Will the new federal proposals succeed?

There is also another question related to this issue. That question is, "To what extent do the institutions offered in Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere in the region truly differ from the ones already practiced in former Yugoslavia?" The federal structure of Bosnia as defined in the Dayton, Ohio, Peace Agreement of November 21, 1995, is perilously close to the one of former Yugoslavia with only one discernible difference – the rhetorical emphasis on the formal institutions of liberal democracy rather than principles of socialism. If this remains so, then the latest experiment in territorial arrangements in Bosnia-Herzegovina simply will not work. Such federal experiments also may not work in other ethnically diverse states such as Macedonia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Current decentralization in Bosnia-Herzegovina doesn't go beyond the regional level, thus allowing ethnicity to remain the single most important attribute of a citizen's identity in the state. Without a thorough decentralization of these regions and simultaneous emphasis on local forms of self-government and the development of civil society, the outcome is likely to be the opposite of the one desired. The unintended outcome could be the further encroachment of ethnicity over supposedly democratic institutions of newly democratizing multinational states. Once this happens, the reputation of federalism as a right and just tool for managing diversity in multination states would be irretrievably lost for the people of these countries.

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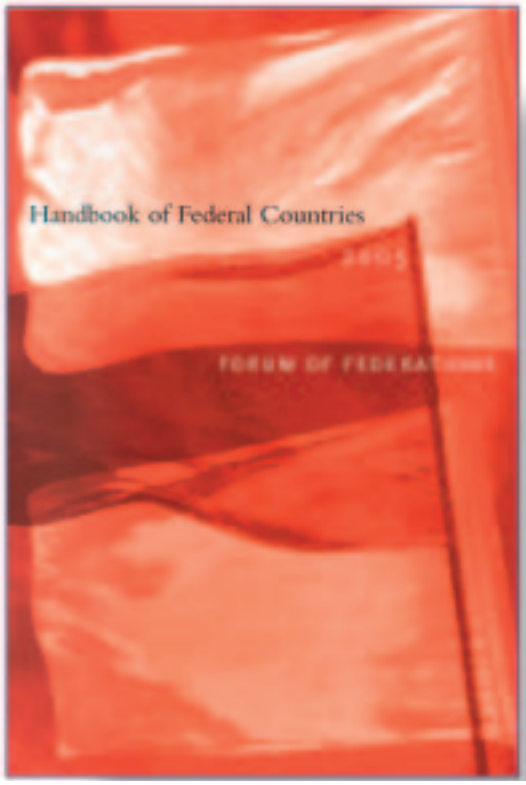

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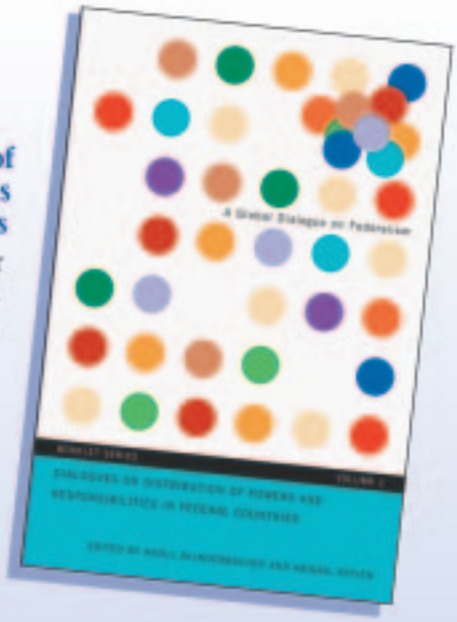

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