

THE POWER OF DECEPTION
Yugoslavia in the Aftermath of the Confrontation with NATO
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INTRODUCTION

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is an aberration in contemporary Europe. The basis for this claim is not in the fact that its economic indicators and trends are among the lowest on the continent (albeit they are) or in the abhorrent state of international isolation in which the country continues to maintain itself. The justification for the claim at the outset of this paper is in the plain and simple fact that Yugoslavia today is a masterly living example of the almost unlimited force of deceit and manipulation of public opinion. Yugoslavs have been victimised and traumatised, subjected to humiliations and deprivations, divested of numerous basic human rights and liberties, yet at the same time constantly convinced that they are poor but free, needy but upright, impoverished but armed with the sound knowledge that Truth and Justice are on their side. Apparently in the process it has not been explained to them that contemporary international relations are based-as they virtually always have been-on interests and law, two concepts quite distinct from the duet of Truth and Justice.

SOME BACKGROUND REMARKS

Two basic concepts and claims continue to possess a high degree of actuality in contemporary Yugoslavia: one, that the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a strong, resilient, respected and robust community, wantonly and deliberately annihilated and devastated by sinister and dark 'centres of international power' as it stood as an obstacle on the path of creation of some 'New Global Order' and, two, that the Serb nation is totally and utterly misunderstood by the international community (or at least the more influential parts of that group) at best and detested (at worst) by those same sinister forces aimed at and determined to impose their will upon the vast majority of humanity. Serbs, in other words, are innocent victims, be it by design or by mere lack of adequate comprehension.

We have extremely serious-to state the very least-difficulties in accepting either of these two claims.

The former Yugoslavia did not implode, explode or self-destruct. It disintegrated, out of the sheer weight of its own internal problems and contradictions, further complicated by the unwillingness of her national power élites to seek a workable compromise solution that would allow for her continued existence, albeit under an amended substance and form. The country could not have been saved in the form and under the system that existed, but the bloodshed and tragedies that ensued during the 1991-1995 period could have been avoided. That alone would have more than justified the effort. What was lacking, however, was the political will required to support that endeavour.

In the case of the core and composition of the present Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, ever since the inception of the federation in April 1992, an atmosphere of confrontation, belligerence and hostility with the outside world was established. Yugoslavia accepted establishment of normal relations with foreign countries exclusively on her own terms: through acceptance of 'co-operation based upon equality', meaning that the Yugoslav version of reality and interpretation of events had to be accepted by the potential partner. Any other version was deemed unacceptable. The country accepted willingly the imposition of a plethora of international punitive measures (best described under the common by-line 'sanctions') in the firm public conviction that they would not be able to 'break the spirit' of the nation.

Yugoslavia's development during her eight years of existence often confuses even the well intentioned but uninitiated observer. The Serbs (and Montenegrins to a lesser degree) have been described as 'fanatical', 'nationalistic', 'fundamentalist', 'recalcitrant' and even 'schismatic'. In fact, they are frightened, confused, frustrated, disoriented and at a loss to comprehend fully the calamity that has befallen them. The worst part of this tragedy is contained in the fact that for the most they appear to be incapable of comprehending that their present position and plight is to a large degree the result of their own distorted grasp of existing reality.

Contemporary Yugoslavia never underwent a genuine political and economic transition. It is not undergoing one now either. The vast accumulated social energy that could have been directed towards demands for genuine democratisation and reforms was diverted by a crafty and ruthless power élite raised on a Machiavellistic neo-Bolshevik methodology of attainment and maintenance of power towards a campaign for 'national emancipation' and the denial of the right to self-determination, as defined and accepted in international law. The energy that could have been spent on attaining democracy was wasted on waging a futile civil war doomed to conclude as it did in Dayton in 1995.

Yugoslavia has been accused-even by her few supporters such and for whatever motives they are-of not having waged a successful and comprehensive propaganda and public relations campaign abroad. This is not so. The Yugoslav government won-and brilliantly at that-the propaganda war that it did wage to win the hearts and minds of the domestic population and to convince it that virtually the entire outside world was biased against and hostile towards the Serbs. The minds have in the meantime started to doubt-or some of them at least. Most of the hearts remain convinced that the 'centres of international power' still harbour hatred towards this small nation. What no one, not even their most vociferous propagandists have been able to explain is if this is indeed so (and of course it is not), why would it be thus and what would be the rational justification for such an attitude.

Notwithstanding all her efforts, Yugoslavia has not managed to break out of the imposed circle of isolation that it has been subjected to. No amount of seeking of 'allies' abroad could improve or even alleviate the hideous economic and social conditions that were created as a by-product of isolation. Isolation breeds fear. Fear creates hostility. Hostility is but a step removed from hatred. The worst form of hatred is nationalism. A new generation of young people has reached maturity not knowing the outside world that is beyond its reach due to a mixture of bureaucratic and administrative limitations and financial constraints. Older generations have shown a tendency to revert in times of trouble to their ingrained conservatism and bunker mentality. The breakdown of social values, the isolation from the mainstream of international thought and developments, the xenophobic dread of the unknown

and the overall deterioration of the quality of life are far greater devastating results of the present crisis than any amounts of explosives hurled against the country.

The Serbs are essentially no different from any other nation in the world. They also possess their hopes and their fears, their dreams and their illusions, their truths and their myths. They have no collective masochistic streaks and they certainly take no joy or find solace and comfort in collective suffering. They have, however, fallen victims and prey to the accumulated myths of their history and the full force and brunt of a propaganda machine that has brilliantly played on their psyche and inflamed their nightmarish visions. There does exist a genuine misunderstanding between themselves and the outside world today, but this lack of comprehension is far too complex to be ascribed to merely one culprit.

THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT WITH NATO

Kosovo has been described in many ways and terms. It has been called 'the backbone of Serbian spirituality', the 'vertical pillar of the Serbian nation' and the 'Serbian Holy Land,' to name but a few descriptions. Most Serbian politicians have gone on the record as stating that Serbia cannot continue to exist without Kosovo. Nevertheless, another myth has been broken-Serbia has lost Kosovo but continues to exist.

Mr Milosevic is neither an ogre nor a madman. Quite the contrary, he is a sane and rational politician, a brilliant tactician but a leader absolutely devoid of any sense of strategic vision. If anything, his greatest desire was to emulate his childhood hero, President Tito, on and over as much of the former Yugoslavia as he could control. His motivation is pure and simple-to stay in power as long as possible, as absolutely as possible and over as much territory as he can impose that form of power upon. Those areas where that kind of authority is unfeasible are gradually allowed to slip away, sometimes relatively peacefully, sometime under conditions of bloody conflict. Witness the difference between Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Never comprehending the evolving nature of international relations, Mr Milosevic could never grasp the genuine concern and legitimate interest of the international community and particularly the OSCE (Yugoslavia being after all a European country) over issues of human rights and civil liberties, particularly minority rights. He firmly believed that military and security measures could solve an essentially political and ethnic problem such as the Kosovo one. For a full decade the establishment of a meaningful dialogue with genuine representatives of the Albanian community (such as they were) was neglected in favour of the pursuit of 'loyal Albanians'. When he began to implement increasingly obtrusive measures of force, it was far too late.

Kosovo is in its present state today, not out of any overwhelming specifics of its problems. It has found itself in a quandary due to pure neglect-for decades in fact. No one ruling these areas since 1389 could find a suitable solution for the problem. It is not surprising, therefore, that KFOR and UNMIK will have their work cut out for themselves in the years to come.

After the crisis of October 1998-following which he was forced to accept the incorporation of an international verification mission to Kosovo-Mr Milosevic took stock of his options. One should remember that a referendum held in April 1998 (with a reported turnout of nearly 83 per cent) produced a plurality of 93 per cent rejecting any 'foreign participation' in the resolution of the Kosovo problem. In the wake of the acceptance of 'verifiers', Mr Milosevic

counted that his compatriots would conveniently forget that this was a rather active form of 'participation and involvement'. They did.

In assessing the possibility of NATO intervention, he firmly believed that:

- (a) That NATO was bluffing,
- (b) That if it was not, it would be incapable and constrained in applying the full force of military capability against Yugoslavia and
- (c) That NATO was unwilling to assume the horrendous risk of suffering substantial losses in manpower in the case of the inevitable and unavoidable forced entry by land forces into Kosovo, in effect meaning an occupation.

Mr Milosevic was convinced that NATO would not risk the casualties unavoidable in a land confrontation with the Yugoslav Army. This was the message pounded into the minds of the Yugoslav public. A public opinion survey published three days before the start of hostilities in March 1999 showed 82 per cent of all those polled believed that NATO was bluffing. When air strikes did begin the public reaction was more one of surprise and dismay rather than anger or even fear.

We believe this to be a fair assessment of the thinking within his inner circle. Of course, the supporters of the 'conspiracy theory' have their own version. During the course of the parliamentary debate that concluded in the rejection of the Rambouillet texts, the opinion that 'Kosovo could be lost but could not be surrendered' was voiced continuously by government representatives. This gave birth to the theory that the NATO campaign's only purpose was to provide a smokescreen (literally) for the surrender of the province to international control and the establishment of a de facto protectorate, which is probably the most accurate description of the present situation and status of this former Serbian province.

THE CONFLICT AND ITS AFTERMATH

An aura of uncertainty and to some degree even mystery still surrounds many elements of the NATO campaign. The actual war damage has never been accurately assessed, the figures varying between some \$37 billion, as a low figure, to some \$100 billion, as a high one. While \$100 billion may appear absurdly high, it could well be that the accumulated effects of 'sanctions' as applied against Yugoslavia since 1992—in terms of loss of GDP, markets and material damage—may be as high as that if not even higher. GDP in 1999 will have registered a decline of at least 30 per cent compared to the previous year. Exports will be at least 48 per cent lower than in 1998 and imports in the same magnitude. For a country that depends on foreign markets and is highly vulnerable for spare parts, technology and equipment, these are devastating figures indeed. Infrastructure has been damaged to a substantial degree. Inflation for 1999 as a whole is around 35 per cent, with at least 40 per cent 'carried over' from 1998. Monetary policy targets (primary money or M1) have overshoot by at least 40 per cent. Reconstruction and rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure has been carried out through the simple and convenient expedient of compelling construction companies to perform tasks without remuneration and using building materials obtained from producers at no charge—out of a sense of patriotic duty.

Plans and forecasts for 2000 appear to be based on a combination of foregone conclusions and wishful thinking, rather than serious econometric analysis and objective evaluation of existing possibilities and probabilities. GDP growth is forecasted at 14 per cent (which, bearing in

mind the 30 per cent decline in 1999, does not mean much), exports are expected to grow by 28 per cent and imports by 'at least as much'. Given that there is no likelihood or even serious probability that the market access conditions on the European market and the general conditions and circumstances regarding the external environment surrounding Yugoslavia are likely to change anytime soon, it remains unclear at best as regards the bases for these assumptions. Inflation-apart from the 35 per cent carried over from 1999-is targeted at zero.

All this, however, from the standpoint of the beliefs, opinions and views of the public, appears to be if not exactly irrelevant then at least somewhat superfluous.

The confrontation with NATO-the officially used terminology is exclusively 'NATO aggression'-has been described to public opinion and the electorate as a huge triumph and victory by the Yugoslav state, its government, armed forces and president over the 'dark and sinister forces of the new international order'. It is interesting to note that the accords signed with NATO and the entirety of Resolution 1244 of the Security Council of the UN have been described officially as a "huge" improvement over the Rambouillet documents, in the sense that the accords signifying the cessation of hostilities in June 1999 recognised the sovereignty of Yugoslavia over Kosovo and ruled out the possibility of unhindered NATO movement through Yugoslavia. What was particularly important from the standpoint of the regime was the clause that there would be no referendum regarding the right of the Kosovo Albanians to self-determination, with the inevitable implication that it would lead to a demand for independence and the formation of a separate state. The deployment of NATO in Kosovo and the subsequent retreat and withdrawals of all Serbian troops and administrators went virtually unnoticed in the press.

It went unnoticed in the eyes of public opinion as well.

The Kosovo issue today in Yugoslavia is surrounded by an eerie aura of silence, dismay and disregard. Even the opposition parties, such as they are and organised as they can be, in their platforms do not even try to take issue over Kosovo or even criticise the government in an exaggerated manner over this problem. One is almost tempted to ask what the conflict was actually all about. Why did it end when it did and was it really the confrontation that was presented to the public or simply a huge sound and light show aimed at concealing some ulterior designs and motives?

One may at least be pardoned for asking.

What, one may ask, was the real stated goal of the campaign? To prevent a humanitarian catastrophe? To ensure that Albanian human rights would not be violated or unprotected? To drive the Yugoslav military out of Kosovo? To place the province under international jurisdiction? To introduce a sizeable NATO land force into the Balkans and to drive Mr Milosevic from power in the process? After Dayton, Mr Milosevic's propaganda machine attempted very hard to portray him as the 'unavoidable influential factor of Balkan stability'. Is he still that, albeit somewhat covertly, or has he been finally and irrevocably condemned to the dustbin of history, the only remaining issue being exactly how to perform this operation?

As in the majority of Balkan countries, Yugoslavia today has more questions than answers. This, in itself is not necessarily an evil. What is ominous, however, is that Mr Milosevic's claim of triumph and victory over NATO does not ring hollow or false, and as time transpires the veracity of his statement gains credibility and credence.

Mr Milosevic won by the mere fact that he did not lose. His triumph consists in the fact that his political influence, strength, position and power at the moment of writing of this article (January 2000) are no less than they were at the start of the conflict with NATO. If by virtue of nothing more than that, he has emerged from this ordeal even strengthened. In the eyes of the Yugoslav public, which respects nothing and no one more than a winner, this is a huge triumph.

Not only that. Mr Milosevic is magnanimous. He admits that it is not he who won, but rather the Serb nation that managed as a whole to bear the brunt of all that NATO could hurl against it (a somewhat doubtful claim at best) and remain standing in the face of unhindered aggression unleashed by the strongest military block in the world today. All nations like to be told that they are heroes.

The former Yugoslavia had her national epic in the form of the 1941-1945 War of National Liberation. The Spring 1999 NATO aggression and the Yugoslav opposition has provided Mr Milosevic with his own national epic, and that for a country that is just eight years old. Quite a feat.

THE FUTURE

The year 2000 will be an election year in Yugoslavia. Serbian local government elections will most likely take place during the spring, with federal parliamentary elections scheduled by law for the autumn. These last are doubtful and debatable because Montenegro does not appear willing to accept elections under the existing system, characterised by government-controlled media and scarce freedom of the press. Tensions between Serbia and Montenegro are extremely likely to continue during the first half of the year, flaring up occasionally into situations of confrontation. Mr Milosevic's attitude towards Montenegro will depend to an extremely high degree on the seriousness with which he understands international warnings that any actions he may take to destabilise the legitimate organs of this republic will be met by international force. This message seems to have been transmitted rather clearly, but it would not in our opinion hurt to repeat it as frequently as necessary.

In Serbia itself, the political landscape will remain unstable, volatile, fluctuating and as vulnerable to personality quarrels as it has been in the past.

We have little doubt that some circles in the West desire the removal of Mr Milosevic. Only internal forces in Serbia itself can do this and these forces, for the moment, appear to be barely in the process of consolidation and reassessment of their own strategies and political positions. Mr Milosevic is biding his time and waiting better days. The 'better days' imply what is referred to in official circles as a "shift in the global and geo-political balance of power". This implies a change of government in Moscow (Mr Putin, Mr Zuyganov, Mr Primakov and Mr Zhirinovskiy are all suitable candidates, in that order), and in Washington as well. The official assessment in Belgrade is that a Bush administration would most probably adopt a different and distinct policy towards Yugoslavia and the American involvement in the Balkans. The parameters, expectations and analysis these hopes are based on are indiscernible. The undeniable fact remains that this appears to be the official line held in government circles.

In the meantime, Belgrade believes that the debate regarding the renewal of Resolution 1244 in the Security Council in June 2000 will be a chance for Russia and China to confront the

West over the 'injustices' of this document and the practice that has followed its implementation.

On a more ominous level, however, Yugoslavia (or Serbia at least) appears to be initiating a concentrated campaign to reintroduce elements of ideological rigidity and a 'politically correct' interpretation of international events, affairs and the very state of the world at the start of the new Millennium. The official regime appears to be reverting to some of the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism, expecting a serious conflict between Western countries over world markets. If one is tempted to remind one's self of Lenin's definition of imperialism as the highest form of capitalism, then Mr Milosevic would be a suitable and satisfactory interlocutor.

In general, from the standpoint of official ideology, Marxism-Leninism is neither dead nor buried. It would appear to be biding its time to perform an almost Lazarian resurrection, at least in Yugoslavia. Nor does ideology as a concept appear to be defunct either. What they do appear to lack at the moment are suitable midwives, but that may yet be amended for the better.

The basic and for the time being still insurmountable problem of and for the opposition in Serbia remains the fact that the regime is not nearly as strong as it is weak. The vast bulk and majority of the Serbian population desire change, but they still do not accept the opposition as a credible alternative to the existing administration. Until the opposition manages to present itself as a suitable, credible and above all reliable alternative, then the inborn conservatism hardened and heartened by the existing crisis will continue to maintain the government in power virtually by default. People will not vote for the regime, they will vote against the opposition, and until they start voting against the regime out of frustration, anger and an unwillingness to tolerate existing humiliations any longer, circumstances will not fundamentally change.

The West often wonders how it can assist democratic forces in Serbia. To be sure, these forces exist and they do require assistance. However, the greatest assistance that the West could grant to and for democracy in Serbia would be to undercut and remove the very foundation upon which Mr Milosevic's entire edifice of power stands: sanctions. It is the regime of sanctions and international isolation that maintains Mr Milosevic and his cronies in their present conditions and positions of power, wealth and influence. Without sanctions, in the conditions and circumstances of the free and unimpeded flow of people, ideas, goods and services Yugoslavia would find itself fundamentally altered. The cage in which it has been shut can only continue as a breeding ground for extremism and xenophobia and a permanent festering sore of problems for the entire area. It cannot be locked up and the key conveniently forgotten somewhere because geography denies such a solution. The practicalities of something similar are also a relevant point.

We can fully appreciate the political considerations and obstacles that stand in the path of the abolition of sanctions against Yugoslavia at present. However, if this statement can be taken as a plea for at least serious consideration of the fact that it is they keeping Mr Milosevic politically afloat, then so be it.

CONCLUSION

The situation in the FRY in 2000 is unlikely to improve for the better. Economic developments will remain feeble and critical. The international circumstances surrounding the country are unlikely to change without the regime's acceptance of political conditions, something that it is highly unlikely to do. On the other hand, a serious domestic campaign aimed at reaffirming that development and growth are possible even without external assistance is under way. Self-reliance will gain credence both as an ideology and as a path.

The West should bear in mind that Yugoslavia, if properly motivated, is capable of suffering levels of deprivation and scarcities that are probably completely unacceptable in most Western countries. If survival is the order of the day, Yugoslavia is quite capable of achieving this feat for quite some time to come. To be sure, there can be no talk of growth or development in a meaningful sense, but the threshold of survival is so low that it virtually does not exist at all.

If the more influential members of the international community continue to pursue the present policies towards Yugoslavia, the probability is that it will continue as a source of instability.