

Yugoslav civil war process can still be stopped

by Konstantin George

The June 25 declarations of independent statehood by the western Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia, and the brutal ongoing intervention on the territories of these republics by the Serbian-controlled Yugoslav Army, mark the formal start of a civil war process, potentially but not inevitably quite bloody. This process did not start on June 25. The die was cast when, back in mid-May, the national-bolshevik Serbian cabal, grouped around Serbia's Communist President Slobodan Milosevic and backed by a powerful Serbian extremist faction in the armed forces, police, and security service, rejected the offer by Slovenia and Croatia to peacefully end the centralized Yugoslav Federation, and replace it with a loose confederation of sovereign republics. This plan, also supported by the republics of Bosnia and Macedonia (i.e., four of Yugoslavia's six republics) represented the only viable means to extricate Yugoslavia from civil war, partition, and the emergence of a "Greater Serbia" from the ruins of the former federation.

In a more fundamental causal sense, the die had been cast two years ago when the Belgrade government hired as a so-called economics adviser one Jeffrey Sachs of the Harvard mafia. Sachs and the International Monetary Fund, which recommended him, imposed on Yugoslavia the same austerity conditionalities as were foisted on the Polish nation, with the same result: depression-level mass unemployment combined with hyperinflation; a reversal of living standards first by years, and then by decades; and a halt to all projects for national economic development.

There is one key difference. Poland is ethnically homogeneous. Applying Sachsomania to a multi-national state such as Yugoslavia ensures, besides the full gamut of economic and social horrors, the guaranteed breakup, in a few years at most, of the state along ethnic lines. The crisis is not "Made in

Yugoslavia." Had there been a Western policy of promoting national and regional economic development in the republics of Yugoslavia, the country today would not be at the brink of civil war.

On May 15, under the old Yugoslav state presidential rotation system, it was the turn of a Croat, Stepan Mesic, to become Yugoslavia's President and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. The Serbian cabal blocked Mesic from attaining, by merely one vote, the required five votes of the eight members of the collective State Presidency. Ever since then, the State Presidency has ceased to exist. It was replaced by a new Serbian-dominated executive cabinet, whose three key players are the federal prime minister, Ante Markovic, and two Serbian generals, Defense Minister Kadijevic and Interior Minister Petar Granin. This forced the question for Slovenia and Croatia, not to wait and allow negotiations for a confederation to take their course, but to set June 26 as the latest date for proclaiming independent statehood. Note that both republics emphasized that they have left "federal Yugoslavia," and are more than willing to re-enter, especially in the case of Croatia, if Yugoslavia becomes a loose confederation.

Croatia, which includes Yugoslavia's Adriatic Coast with its numerous beach resorts, has absolutely no interest in civil war, and certainly not in the summer. The 1991 political upheaval has already gravely injured its economy. Gross domestic product fell some 20% over the first five months of the year, and the number of people either unemployed or on half pay stands at 400,000 (out of a total population of 4.5 million). Belgrade timed the crisis to wreck the last pillar of the Croatian economy, the foreign exchange from the summer tourist invasion. Normally, some 2 million come. This year, the Adriatic will be a littoral of ghost towns.

The brink of mass bloodshed

The most dangerous “spark” potentials for civil war provoked by Army deployments are:

- Slovenia: As of this writing (June 27), Army units with large numbers of tanks and armored vehicles have surrounded the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana and tank columns have seized Ljubljana Airport, except for a landing strip held by armed men of the Slovenian Territorial Army. En route to the airport, makeshift roadblocks of cars placed by Slovenians to straddle the highway were simply crushed by the tanks. Under orders to seize all Slovenian border crossings with Italy and Austria, Army units are advancing toward these points. Slovenia’s President, Milan Kucan has issued a call to Slovenes for armed resistance, and appealed to other Yugoslav republics to send in troops and assistance.

- Croatia: Here the Army deployments betray the Serbian goal of creating a Greater Serbia including the regions outside of Serbia where Serbs predominate. In Croatia, except for troop concentrations in the Adriatic port garrisons, such as Split and Rijeka, troop movements are mostly non-existent in the two-thirds of Croatia where the Croat majority predominates. The Army has seized the less densely populated one-third of Croatia, where the Serbs (600,000 in Croatia) predominate: Knin in the north, and more importantly, the Krajina region inland from the Adriatic in the south. These regions had already been under the de facto control of Army-assisted Serbian irregular militias, with no Croatian Army presence. Thus, the Army has attained a Serbian *Anschluss* in Croatia, and sits back, taunting Croatia to be the “attacker.”

- Bosnia: In this hapless central republic, sandwiched between Croatia and Serbia, an *Anschluss* is occurring parallel to that in the Serb regions of Croatia. Bordering on Croatian Krajina is the much larger Bosnian region also called Krajina, where most of Bosnia’s large Serbian minority lives (1,300,000, or some 32% of Bosnia’s population). This region has been occupied by the Army. A second deployment, not mentioned in any press, completes the picture. The Army has, under orders to secure “the internal borders of Croatia,” occupied and blocked all routes connecting Croatia with Bosnia. This cuts off the 800,000 Croats who live in Bosnia, near the Croatian frontier, from their kinsmen in Croatia proper. Though nobody is saying so in public, these 800,000 Croats are hostages to ensure Croatia’s future compliance with the new Greater Serbia-dominated map of Yugoslavia. Already, in early June, the Yugoslav media were rife with speculation that a partition of Bosnia was afoot. Either Bosnia would disappear, or continue to exist as a shrunken buffer zone between Croatia and Serbia, with Serbia taking “its share,” and “allowing” the Croat inhabited part to join Croatia, in exchange for Croatia relinquishing Krajina.

Baker fails by design

In the nearly six weeks between May 15 and June 25, there was ample time for a compromise. The reasons that

nothing of the sort happened are to be found outside the borders of Yugoslavia, above all in the capitals of the two superpowers. In June there have been many pious-sounding calls, by Washington, by European governments, and by Moscow, that the Yugoslav Federation must be maintained. The superpowers and the powers of Europe were strangely silent, however, back in mid-May, when they could have intervened, using all the economic levers at their disposal, to turn only one vote and force through the election of Mesic. Their silence ensured that the Yugoslav Federation came to an abrupt and final end.

The final act of sordid conduct in this regard by the Bush administration was the failed June 22 “mediation mission” to Belgrade by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. Baker spent a mere 24 hours in Belgrade, with not even agenda provisions for talks with leaders of the various Yugoslav republics. Baker stated that only Yugoslavia’s continuation as a centralized federation is acceptable to Washington. This killed any remaining hopes for last-minute inter-republic talks to reach some form of agreement on transforming Yugoslavia into a loose confederation. His “mission,” with a U.S. stamp of approval to centralized rule, gave the green light for the Serbian-extremist-dominated federal cabinet cabal to crack down on Slovenia and Croatia in such a way as to ensure partition.

Baker threw the final match into a powder keg atmosphere reminiscent of pre-civil war Lebanon: Every nationality and religious group in the country has formed heavily armed militias, each exercising control over its region. Before Baker’s arrival, all sides were hoping for peace, but preparing for war. With his departure, the only open question became: “Could the civil war process be held to one of limited bloodshed, or, would it snowball into an all-out conflagration?”

The Serb-run Yugoslav Army has armed the Serbs of Serbia proper, the Serbian minorities in Serbia’s primarily ethnic Albanian region of Kosovo, and the Serbian minorities in the republics of Bosnia and Croatia. The governments of Croatia and Slovenia have formed their own armies, equipping them with massive amounts of arms, imported from Austria, Hungary, Italy, Germany, and Ibero-America. During June, the Army had been transferring all key war-fighting assets to Serbian territory. This has included all of Yugoslavia’s large Air Force, and indeed nearly all civilian aircraft as well. In commando missions on June 21-22, Army pilots flew to Serbian air fields all light aircraft and helicopters they could find in Slovenia, including the entire stock of trainer aircraft Slovenia had procured for its nascent “air force.”

The tragedy of the war that, with very few exceptions, almost no one in Yugoslavia wanted, is now perhaps only an incident or two away. Decisive action by Europe is the only hope. The leading nations of Europe must offer a package of political and above all economic incentives to bring the republics into a solution that would create a new Yugoslav entity based on policies to the mutual advantage of all the sovereign republics.