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# THE PUZZLE OF YUGOSLAVIA: AN INTRODUCTION

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The state of Yugoslavia appears to be one of the rare states in the world which was both created and dissolved through the acts of self-determination of its people(s). As Peter Radan points out in his essay, the first Yugoslavia—the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—was supposed to have been created in 1918 by an act of self-determination of "the people with three names—Serbs, Croats and Slovenes," that is, of the Yugoslavs. The second, federal Yugoslavia was supposed to have dissolved in June 1991 once again by the acts of self-determination of two of its six constituent nations, the Slovenes and Croats. This account, whether tenable or not, suggests that both the creation and the dissolution of Yugoslavia were acts of collective free will and, thus, by definition, not inevitable. The nation or nations of Yugoslavia, according to this account, could have chosen otherwise: they could have chosen not to from a single state and, also, could have chosen not to dissolve it once it was formed.

This account could, of course, be challenged in various ways. Thus, one can argue that post-1945 communist Yugoslavia was created by force which brought together nations of allegedly incompatible cultural and political traditions. But, even if one accepts this, it does not follow that the disintegration of communist Yugoslavia, if achieved through the self-determination of Croats and Slovenes, *was* inevitable. It was still possible for all the nations of Yugoslavia to choose freely to continue to live in one state. To argue that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was inevitable implies that the disintegration was not achieved through free-willed acts of national self-determination. However, the converse is not true: to argue that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was *not*, in fact, achieved through collective acts of self-determination implies neither that the disintegration was inevitable nor that it was not: if (some or all) Yugoslav nations did not freely choose to dissolve their state, this implies nothing about the inevitability or avoidability of its dissolution.

As it happens, several essays in this collection throw some doubts on the national self-determination account of the creation and of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Zdenko Zlatar's essay on the history of the creation of the first Yugoslavia not only reveals severe disagreements among the Serb and Croat politicians about the constitutional structure and the name of the Yugoslav state, which they were about to create in 1917–1918, but shows that the decisions to create the new state were made by a handful of politicians none of whom was elected on a political platform demanding the creation of such a state. Vladimir Goati points out in his essay how small the Yugoslav communist elites were which had, for several years preceding

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the dissolution in 1991, created the political landscape of mutual hostility and fear among the nations of Yugoslavia. Lino Veljak, on the other hand, chronicles the rise of postcommunist national leaders and their use of nationalist populism in Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina to gain power in their respective republics. These essays document a severe "democratic deficit" in the decision-making, leading both to the creation and the disintegration of Yugoslavia: it appears that both were elite-driven acts. If so, one could argue—although the authors of these essays do not do so—that another set of elites, endorsing another set of political ideologies would have neither aimed at the creation of Yugoslavia, nor, once it was created, at its dissolution.

This rather speculative argument is open to speculative counterarguments ("what would have happened, if ...") which would refer to the pressures originating from external powers. Thus, one could argue that, regardless of the ideologies and personalities of the Serbian and Croat elites in 1918, the victorious Entente powers would have pressed for the creation of a larger state such as Yugoslavia in order to provide, among other things, a buffer-zone against the newly emerging Soviet threat. Likewise, one could argue that the pressures from the German and Austrian politicians, favouring the secession of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, would have led to their eventual secession, given that at the time no outside power was ready to defend the territorial integrity of socialist Yugoslavia. While such arguments from external pressures appear to be too speculative to be discussed in scholarly works, several essays in this collection bring into doubt any claim that the initial impetus for the creation or dissolution of Yugoslavia came from outside the country.

In his essay Zdenko Zlatar points out that the Yugoslav idea—the idea of a common state of the South Slavs—with its history stretching to the early nineteenth century provided a common rallying point to the Serb and Croat politicians of otherwise rather diverse political persuasions. As was to be expected, each group of politicians instrumentalised the idea for its own purposes. For many Croat politicians, the primary role of the common Yugoslav state was to safeguard the territory (which they held to be Croatian) from outside claimants (primarily, Italy) and thus to enable native, Croat politicians to gain full political control over it. For many Serb politicians, the common Yugoslav state was to enable them (Serb politicians) to extend their power over territories they had not controlled before 1914. Moreover, as Audrey Helfant Budding points out, non-national or supranational "socialist" Yugoslavism promoted by Yugoslav communist ideologues after 1945, served to legitimise the rule of the Yugoslav Communist party over the whole of Yugoslavia. This was an internationalist identity which did not, and was not intended to, replace the five (from 1968, six) officially recognised national identities; yet it provided many Serbs as well as members of other nations with a sense of belonging to a common state which transcended the past national rivalries and conflicts. In the mid-1960s, once Yugoslavism was abandoned as an official communist ideology and, later, branded as Greater Serbian nationalism, Yugoslavia was left without a



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national or quasi-national ideology which would legitimise the common Yugoslav state and transcend the existing national cleavages; this set the stage for the re-emergence of separate national ideologies of the various nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia. As I argue in my essay, each of these ideologies proclaimed its target nation politically dominant on "its" territory while denying any other nation the right to national self-determination on the same territory. In striving for the political dominance of their target nation over others, these national ideologies in effect anticipated not only the disintegration of Yugoslavia into separate nation-states but also the conflict over the territories with nationally mixed populations which were claimed by two or more emergent nation-states.

The extent to which these formerly dissident national ideologies provided an initial impetus as well as a legitimation for the disintegration of Yugoslavia is still an open question. There is, however, no doubt that they were a home-grown product whose origins date from the pre-communist and even pre-1918 paradigms of nationalist political discourse. As both Lino Veljak and Vladimir Goati argue, the processes leading to the disintegration in 1991 were rooted in the politics of the communist elites which ruled each of the six republics prior to the 1990 multi-party elections. These communist elites had already successfully used nationalist rhetoric for the purposes of their own legitimation. The non-communist, political elites in Slovenia and Croatia in 1989 and 1990, as well as Milošević's neocommunist elites in Serbia, engaged in the politics of national homogenisation in order to win and maintain themselves in power. As the leader of the new Slovene ruling coalition put it so well in 1990 (see Antonić's essay) nationalism was in Yugoslavia a "political technology" for winning and staying in power. As Antonić argues in his essay, the use of this "political technology" ensured that the Slovenian and Croatian political leaders would reject as unsatisfactory any constitutional framework which would try to preserve even the loosest political or economic ties among the separate nation-states emerging after the 1990 elections. Their national program demanded total independence for their emerging states at almost any cost. On the other hand, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević and his supporters were ready to prevent, by military force, their secession from Yugoslavia or at least the secession of Serb-populated areas. The "political technology"—the use of uncompromising nationalist rhetoric for the purposes of mass mobilisation—used by all sides, allowed little if any room for compromise, for constitutional solutions. As Antonić concludes, another set of leaders using a different "political technology" could have found a compromise, for example, a confederal state framework which would guarantee political and civil rights of Serb populations outside Serbia. Nationalism thus appears not only to have provided the initial stimulus for the disintegration but to have prevented any constitutional solution short of the complete dissolution of the Yugoslav state.

While the disintegration of Yugoslavia was dominated by the nationalist rhetoric of the emerging national elites, the response of the international community to the disintegration was dominated by no single principle or policy. The initial overriding



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concern of the major European powers was to stop and prevent the spread of the military conflict arising from the secession of Croatia and Slovenia in June 1991. There was among them, however, no consensus on the way in which to achieve so modest a goal. As Michael Thumann argues in his essay, by the summer of 1991, the German foreign minister and his government had decided to recognise the independence of Croatia and Slovenia. As this decision appears to have been driven primarily by the dynamics of internal German politics, it was not, at least initially, offered as an overall and final solution of the worsening Yugoslav conflict. The German politicians, as well as their constituency, conceived it primarily as a symbolic gesture of support to the nations which were regarded as victims of aggression. The decision, Michael Thumann concludes, was driven neither by German economic interests nor even by a desire to assert German dominance within the EC decision-making bodies; according to him, the decision reflects more a lack of clear foreign policy objectives of the German government than an assertion of the newly discovered German national interests.

However symbolic this recognition of independence was supposed to be, once it became, under German pressure, the official policy of the European Community, its consequences proved to be lasting and extremely costly both for the international community and for many inhabitants of former Yugoslavia. The decision, in effect, prevented any other possible solution to the Yugoslav crisis short of the dissolution of Yugoslavia; it denied the right of self-determination to Serb populations outside of Serbia; and it forced the Bosnian Muslim and Macedonian political leaders, who were initially not seeking independence for their republics, hastily to proclaim the independence of their republics. The EC decision to recognise the independence of Croatia and Slovenia was clearly made on political grounds, including those of sheer political expediency (*e.g.*, to avoid a delay in the agreement on the Maastricht treaty). In spite of this, the European Community formed an Arbitration Commission, chaired by the French jurist Robert Badinter, which, in autumn of 1991, was charged with finding a legal justification for it.

As both Snezana Trifunovska and Peter Radan point out, the Arbitration Commission appears to have been given an almost impossible task: it was to find a legal justification for the change of the international borders of Yugoslavia while at the same time proclaiming legally sacrosanct the internal borders among its federal units. By proclaiming the latter borders unchangeable (except by mutual agreement), the EC Arbitration commission effectively restricted the right of national self-determination only to the largest nation in each federal unit of Yugoslavia while at same time denying such a right to the nations which were spread throughout Yugoslavia. This rather selective approach to national self-determination appears to have been based on the blatantely false assumption that the federal Yugoslavia was made up of six nation-states. As a result, the most numerous and most dispersed nation in Yugoslavia—the Serbs—as well as the largest national minority—the Albanians—were denied the right of self-determination within Yugoslavia. The Serbs' misfortune



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was that they lived in too many federal units, the Albanians' misfortune was that they had no federal unit of "their own." As William Maley points out in his essay, "self-determination" is a rhetorical device well fitted to the needs of indigenous leaders seeking to get rid of colonial rulers; its selective use in the case of Yugoslavia obviously did not promote stability in the region.

The decision by the EC to recognise the independence of two former Yugoslav republics in January 1992 will no doubt continue to be a subject of scholarly (and non-scholarly) controversy. So will the U.N. involvement in the conflict in Croatia and in Bosnia-Hercegovina and, later, in the form of "preventive deployment" in Macedonia. In Croatia the U.N. forces from January 1992 to May 1995 played their traditional peacekeeping role, based on the agreement of all sides in the conflict to cease hostilities; they were to monitor and to uphold the ceasefire and, in general, to keep the peace in the the areas which, prior to the conflict, had a Serb majority. In the absence of any agreement between the warring parties in Bosnia-Hercegovina the U.N. military role there was, in June 1992, initially limited to the protection of humanitarian supplies to civilians; the mandate was later extened to the protection of (mainly Bosnian Muslim) civilians in the U.N. designated "safe areas." The restriction of the U.N. mandate in this way had come under a good deal of criticism, some of which William Maley voices in his essay. In particular, he holds that the widespread and systematic character of the atrocities, which he believes, were committed by Bosnian Serbs undermined any justification for the claim of the U.N. impartiality in the conflict; he argues that this could have justified a much more vigorous use of military force by the U.N. against the Bosnian Serbs. This argument, as Trifunovska indicates, arises from a major change in the perception of the U.N. role in the post-Cold War era: the U.N. in Bosnia-Hercegovina and elsewhere (*e.g.*, in Iraq) was expected to protect, by military force, national or ethnic groups which are held to be victims of aggression or militarily weaker or both. This is a new role for the U.N. which, as Maley concedes, this organisation was not equipped to perform well.

In the conflict in former Yugoslavia, the U.N. agencies provided, as Maley points out, humanitarian aid which kept alive many civilians on all sides. However, the U.N. not only failed effectively to protect the militarily weaker side in the Bosnian conflict (the Bosnian Muslims), but also failed in its traditional peace-keeping role in Croatia: once the U.S.-trained and NATO-equipped Croatian army, with the support of the U.S. administration, attacked the Serb-held areas of Croatia, the U.N. forces were brushed aside and the U.N. offered no protection to the remaining or fleeing Serb civilians. More than any other aspect of the U.N. operation in former Yugoslavia, this showed how dependent the U.N. operations in former Yugoslavia were on the policies of the U.S. government.

The U.S. involvement in the conflict in former Yugoslavia is, unfortunately, not a subject of any essays in the volume. However, the ability of the U.S. negotiating team to conclude the Dayton peace agreements quickly, in November 1995,



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following the U.S.-initiated NATO airstrikes against the Bosnian Serbs, suggests that the absence of direct U.S. involvement in peace negotiations and military operations in former Yugoslavia until mid-1995 could explain, at least to some extent, the failure of the previous U.N. and EC peace negotiations in the area. The U.S., as it appears, was the only power that could get all the warring parties to conclude a peace agreement, however temporary some of them may regard it to be. The U.S. was in a position to dictate the terms of the peace agreement because the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim governments became dependent on continuing U.S. support and because the U.S. was ready to use its and its allies' military force to defeat and intimidate the Serbs leadership into accepting its peace terms.

This perhaps generates yet another puzzle about former Yugoslavia. The European powers, through the European Community (later the European Union) were able to speed up and to sanction the division of the federal Yugoslavia into its former federal units. Yet they proved to be unable and/or unwilling to enforce the borders of the newly recognised states by their own military forces and to negotiate the end of the conflicts which erupted in Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina. The enforcement of these borders and the peace negotiations were ultimately carried out by the U.S.: only with U.S. support were the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim armies able to defeat the Serb military in 1995 and the U.S. then negotiated the first peace agreement in Bosnia-Hercegovina as well as the mutual recognition of the successor states of former Yugoslavia. Why were the European powers not ready or able to enforce the partition of Yugoslavia which they had readily sanctioned? Why was the U.S. so reluctant to get involved in peace negotiations and peacekeeping in former Yugoslavia, once the impotence or indifference of the European powers became obvious? These and many other questions about the disintegration of Yugoslavia still remain to be answered.



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