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Recommended Citation

Guzina,Dejan. "The Self-Destruction of Yugoslavia," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 27, no. 1/2 (2000): 21-32.

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The Self-Destruction of Yugoslavia

Dejan Guzina*

Yugoslavia neither should nor can exist as an institutional service to certain republics, as a kind of confederation. I believe it would result in the political disintegration of the whole. ... Parceling out Yugoslav socialism into separate, republican socialisms would inevitably lead to the emergence of a quite different social reality. ... Each nationalization of socialism as idea, movement or organization always ends in the emergence of a totalitarian ethnocentric community. Veljko Rus¹

Abstract: The self-destructiveness of the former Yugoslav federal system has not yet received its appropriate place in numerous accounts of the causes of Yugoslavia's disintegration. This essay explores the self-destructive mechanism of the former Yugoslav socialist federal system. Its main thesis is that it was the institutional composition of the former Yugoslavia that was largely responsible for the cleavages in the 1980s, which caused the mutually exclusive ethnic nationalisms of today. In other words, the crisis, the subsequent ethnonational homogenization and the dissolution of the federal state were a natural outcome of the constitutional foundations of the system, albeit the emphasis on the systemic characteristics of Yugoslavia's disintegration does not imply that many other important historical, economic, sociocultural and international factors did not play their role in the violent break-up of the country.

Numerous terminological peculiarities of the Yugoslav socialist self-management system led Western analysts to believe that Yugoslavia was 'different' -- something of a bridge between the liberal West and the communist East. But the country that emerged from the ashes of World War II clearly belonged to the communist world, because the party had a monopoly in society in accordance with Marxist-Leninist ideology. The founding fathers of the Second Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, and his 'ideological lieutenant,' Edvard Kardelj, faithfully followed Lenin on two key points: the policy of democratic centralism, and the famous formula for dealing with the national question in multi-ethnic communist states -- "national in form and socialist in content."

To understand how nationalism ultimately overwhelmed democratic centralism to become both 'form' and 'content' in the former Yugoslavia, it is useful first to recall the three elements of Lenin's strategy on national questions, as applied throughout the Communist world. First, prior to the communist takeover, there is the promise of the right to national self-determination, including the right to secession. Second, following the communist victory, a policy of gradual assimilation, but with a measure of territorial autonomy for compact national groups. Third, and at all subsequent times, the communist party must remain centralized and free from nationalist leanings.² The last point demonstrates how, for Lenin, class allegiances always remained of a higher order than national ones.

Walker Connor has asserted that, in the pre-communist phase, Lenin promoted self-determination in order to reduce the perceived importance of the national question, and to keep public attention focused on economic demands and grievances against the *ancien régime*: "Lenin could readily conceive of a

* This is a final version of the paper that has been published in *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 27, no. 1/2 (2000): 21-32. The author gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He also expresses his gratitude to Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone for her insightful comments on earlier drafts and to Simon Scott for his support in expressing the ideas of the article in clear English.

nationally aroused people acting in opposition to their best economic interest by fighting for independence. But with nationalistic suspicions laid to rest by the offer of independence, economic motivation would win out.”³

In fact, Lenin intended to support only those national movements that advanced the cause of socialist revolution. Once the revolution was won, decisions on self-determination would be guided by principles of ‘scientific socialism’ rather than by ethnic allegiances. Democratic centralism, directed by a denationalized party, would then ensure the socialist content of every multiethnic communist state. The central paradox between ‘national form’ and ‘socialist content’ is thereby solved. The multiethnic communist state is a federation composed of national republics in which real power is exercised by a unitary party. Under such conditions, nations might ‘flourish,’ but not nationalisms, as they would be transcended by a common class content.⁴

Connor highlights a basic defect in Lenin’s scheme by pointing out that national forms “in and by themselves, help to reinforce and perpetuate that sense of group uniqueness which, according to the Communist Manifesto, should be daily more and more vanishing.”⁵ The more so, as in Lenin’s mind, ‘national form’ included the creation of autonomous, self-governing territorial units with nationally-determined borders, rigid adherence to the principle of equality of nations, equality of languages and autonomous cultural policies, none of which were practically compatible with the supposed ‘socialist content’ of the state itself.⁶

Communist parties in power further strengthened ‘national form’ at the expense of the ‘socialist content.’ Their leaders were unable to address satisfactorily “the lack of effectiveness of government performance, the conflict between broad social forces and the ‘New Social Class’ of Milovan Đilas, and ethnic and regional demands for autonomy and genuine federalism.”⁷ Nevertheless their answer to these cleavages was a ‘theoretical elaboration’ of Lenin’s guidelines that in a way was worthy of his practical genius. It consisted in broadening the legitimacy base of the Party along national lines, while keeping the principle of democratic centralism intact. Gregor Tomc explains the almost deterministic shift:

Sooner or later, its [the Party’s] basis of legitimacy had to shift to representation of other particular segments of society. This was especially the case because there were no other political parties left to represent these other segments. So the party had to claim a new and broader basis of legitimacy to make its interests credible to all sections of society, with the exception of “class enemies” -- however these were defined. The party had to develop from the avant-garde of the proletariat to become representative of all people of good will. In short, it becomes a people’s party – and ... it is the people who embody the nation in modern societies. In this sense ruling communist parties unavoidably became national parties.⁸

Henceforth, communist parties were balancing between two bases of legitimacy -- nation and class. It used each according to the political demands of the day, to maintain the party’s predominant position. Since a decisive shift in either direction could have endangered its ruling position, each period of liberalization and decentralization was followed by a period of restored dogma and centralization.⁹ The two legitimacy bases became poles between which party members would situate themselves. They could identify themselves as ‘communist nationalists’ or ‘national communists,’ but rarely as ‘internationalists’ in the classical Marxist sense of the word.¹⁰

The perpetual circle of reforms and counter-reforms expressed the dilemma of every communist state -- how to recognize spontaneous social demands while maintaining the monopolistic role of the party. Chalmer Johnson believes that party attempts to subsume popular aspirations caused the development of a ‘transfer goal culture’ designed to give the appearance of dynamic evolution while maintaining the status quo:

A Communist party in power adopts a transfer culture, which it expounds and defends as moving society towards a utopian goal culture but which in fact has as its first two priorities the preservation of the party's power monopoly and the maintenance of the social system. Third in priority, but still of decisive importance, are schemes thought to be necessary for achieving the goal culture. ... All three demand societal mobilization, a process that is inevitably alienating because at least the third priority has never been legitimized among the mass of the population.¹¹

In Yugoslavia, as in other communist federations, maintaining the system required 'reconciliation' along ethnic lines of social pressures for change with the leading role of the party. Given their ideological background, the party élite could think of no other solution, because it believed that Yugoslavia would develop into a conflict-free society. In other words, the élites could not conceive of permitting the development of Western-style interest groups, or introducing conflict-resolving institutions to produce a dynamic but smoothly-functioning society.

Already at its second meeting, held at Jajce on 29 November, 1943, the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*i.e.*, the Council of the Partisan Movement) announced the creation of a Federal People's Republic to be organized on federalist and communist principles. Following Lenin, the main emphasis at this stage was on national liberation, rather than on the class content of the socialist revolution. This continued in the first Constitution of 1946, which proclaimed the rights of peoples to self-determination, including secession (Article 1),¹² the equality of all nationalities and their right to their own language, culture and identity (Article 13).¹³

Each nation was granted a separate federal unit, except Bosnia and Herzegovina because of its multiethnic configuration, with assemblies, governments, courts, anthems, and other symbols of equal standing in the federation, irrespective of size and population. But this was just a 'facade federalism,'¹⁴ because, as Dennison Rusinow has asserted, federal arrangements were "carefully counterbalanced by a highly centralized but carefully multi-national one party dictatorship, with police apparatus and a centrally planned command economy."¹⁵ This essentially Soviet model was abandoned only in the early 1950s, after forced collectivization pushed the country to the edge of famine. It was not so much Tito's famous "no" to Stalin in 1948, but rather the failure of the command economy and the urgent need for American food aid that forced the party to abandon Stalinism.

The Stalinist model was replaced by workers' self-management of productive enterprises. Prices were gradually liberalized, and investment decisions handed over to companies, "transferring economic power from the central ministries to the banking system and the regional authorities."¹⁶ The federal centre retained authority over fiscal instruments, foreign exchange, and trade. This contradictory situation gave rise to interregional competition for scarce centrally allocated resources. Given the national basis of Yugoslavia's regions, such competition soon assumed a national character: "Questions like priority for basic or processing industries (concentrated in different regions), or which resource, seaport, railroad, or highway should be developed first, were again and by 1963 openly interpreted as national questions by those involved and by the public at large. Political leaders defending local and economic interests were regarded (and increasingly saw themselves) as national leaders defending vital national interests."¹⁷

Between 1950 and 1965, the 'socialist content' of society was maintained through tight party control over social stratification and the de-Stalinization process. As Connor has pointed out, the 1953 Constitution was the only one in Yugoslav history to avoid all reference to self-determination. The period also saw a short-lived campaign of "Yugoslavism" (Jugoslovenstvo), Edvard Kardelj's idea for a pan-Yugoslav supranational socialist patriotism that would transcend cultural, linguistic, and economic differences.¹⁸ Summing up the situation, Laso Sekelj concludes that: "decentralization bereft of democratization and conflicting principles of self-management and dictatorship of the proletariat [under

the disguise of socialist Yugoslavism], were from the outset woven into the very foundation of the self-management system."¹⁹

Yugoslavism did not last, because many parts of the country perceived it as a threat to their distinct identities, and in particular, as an attempt by Serbian hard-liners to identify Yugoslavia as an essentially Serbian nation.²⁰ Kardelj corrected himself in a speech to the Eighth Party Congress in 1964, characterizing *Jugoslovenstvo* as psychological centralism which, along with centralized economic planning, had provoked local nationalisms, thereby exacerbating the problem it had been designed to solve. His new prescription was to devolve decisions to the subregional level, in order to deterritorialize national rivalries and to prevent people from perceiving issues in ethnonational terms.²¹

In 1966, Tito lent his support to non-Serbian regional leaders and proponents of economic and political decentralization by purging the Serbian conservative and centralist Alexander Ranković and his followers, and opening the way to the federalization of the party. The Ninth Party Congress in 1969 gave republican branches the right to appoint their representatives to the Presidium, the former Central Committee, and to the newly created top of the Party Executive Bureau, which consisted of two representatives from each republic and one from each province.²² Despite this extended role for republics in policy making, democratic centralism remained intact, enabling the party successfully to control society.

From the economic reforms of 1965 until 1971, Yugoslavia had a free-wheeling economic system that came to be known as "laissez faire socialism."²³ Almost all central command planning was eliminated, foreign exchange controls were eased, and transfers to the less-developed republics and provinces were reduced. A new managerial élite began to emerge. 'De-etatisation' stopped at the republican doors, so that democratization did not follow economic liberalization.

This 'market socialism' had mixed results. High growth rates, averaging 9.8% per annum for the period of 1953-1971, raised the standard of living, while the top party echelon saw its domination of society eroded by a new technical-managerial élite, which was gradually fusing with the republican leadership. The maintenance of fixed low prices for raw materials, agricultural products, transport and energy favoured economic growth in the more developed regions. This exacerbated competition between the national republics and promoted a surge of nationalist feelings throughout the country.²⁴

'National form' was gaining the upper hand against the 'socialist content.' Between 1971 and 1974, the party tried to counter the trend by reasserting democratic centralism in a new way, replacing the 'socialist market' with the 'economy-by-agreement' model. This involved a massive bureaucratic restructuring of the locally-devolved self-management boards, aimed at destroying the power base of the emerging liberal managerial class. There followed a purge of republican élites in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Vojvodina, and Macedonia.²⁵ At the same time, Tito preserved the balance in Lenin's formula – 'national in form, socialist in content' -- by further political decentralization. The 1974 Constitution granted republics and provinces the status of national states, while 'the powers of the federal centre were reduced to a few roles such as foreign policy, defense, and a minimum of economic instruments.'²⁶

These political moves and counter-moves can be best explained using Johnson's 'transfer-of-culture' thesis, which is based on the idea that the party's first task is to maintain its power. In this regard, it is not surprising that, in the space of one month (June/July 1971), Tito first forced the Yugoslav Parliament to adopt constitutional amendments granting sovereign rights to the autonomous provinces within Serbia, and then announced "that any confrontation between the Federation and republics is wrong and harmful, because the two are inseparable parts of our self-managing organization. Our sovereignty is one and indivisible -- be it republics or the federation that are involved."²⁷

Tito's words were aimed at the Croatian communist leadership headed by Mika Tripalo and Savka Dabčević-Kučar, whom he purged in December 1971, thereby crushing the "Croatian Spring."²⁸ One

year later he suppressed the so-called Serbian liberals, led by communist chairman Marko Nikezić and secretary Latinka Perović, in an equally brutal fashion. Although less has been said in the West about this second purge, one of the most astute writers on the former Yugoslav affairs, Croatian journalist Jelena Lovrić, maintains that it was perhaps even more detrimental for the future of Yugoslavia than the removal of Croatian "national liberals:"

The Serbian leadership of the time, therefore, took the view that Yugoslavia was not synonymous with Serbia, but was the collective concern of all of its peoples; the Serbs were not, nor should they be, more responsible for it than others. Serbia had its own house to set in order and would, in the long run, do more for the Yugoslav federation by focusing on its own development and modernization. The liberals were acutely aware of the backwardness of their republic, and took account of the fact that the remote Serbian hinterland bore little resemblance to "liberal" Belgrade. With the purge of the liberal circle, the movement to "separate" Serbia from Yugoslavia was permanently derailed; and the option of a democratic Serbia was closed. Another option, however, remained -- an option which was to grow ever louder.²⁹

By 1974, another cycle in the dialectic between 'national form' and 'socialist content' was over. The party and state structure had been modified in accordance with the constitutional amendments of 1971, but also to meet some of the demands of the Croatian 'mass movement' (e.g., full republican control over national economies). At the same time, decentralization was counter-balanced by a careful choice of new republican elites, aimed at keeping the party centralized and free of all national proclivities, in accordance with the third of Lenin's maxims. As the 1950s and 1960s had already demonstrated, decentralization without democratization generated a pervasive modernization crisis in the one-party state.³⁰

Moreover, each cycle was ending with gains for 'national form' at the expense of 'socialist content.' The effective end of Lenin's formula came at the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978. Tito, in what was to be his last address to a party congress, still stressed the importance of 'democratic centralism' as "the basic principle of internal relations, organizational standards and entire activity of the LCY."³¹ Yet the same congress saw the completion of the federalization of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. Henceforth, the Central Committee and the Party Presidium were organized solely on the basis of the ethnic principle. This effectively blocked the application of democratic centralism at federal level.

The leading role of the party remained at the level of the constituent units, but as Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone has observed, structural changes in the state (regional autonomy) and the party (ethnic representation) seriously eroded the party's monopoly of power and introduced elements of pluralism.³² This fatally undermined the system designed to ensure lasting stability and prosperity after Tito's death. Once his personal charisma disappeared from the equation, and no matter how careful he had been in choosing his successors, they inevitably started acting according to rules delineated in the 1974 Constitution, so that, as William Zimmerman has aptly pointed out, the decision-making process stopped being Leninist, while failing to become pluralist in character.³³

The institutional changes in the 1974 Constitution effectively began the confederalization of Yugoslavia, which ended in its disintegration. The final result was far from Tito's intentions, despite what is often heard nowadays among the nationalist intelligentsia of the "Third" Yugoslavia (*i.e.*, Serbia and Montenegro). Rather, the 1974 Constitution was yet another attempt by the old guard, led by Tito and Kardelj, to solve the twin problems of re-emerging nationalism and the threat to communism from liberal tendencies. The idea was that a reformed self-management system could sustain high rates of growth, while decentralization would satisfy demands for democratization and a greater regional say in decision-making. This programme proved disastrous. The party failed completely to prepare the economy for a qualitatively new stage of modernization. Ethnic nationalism continued to gain ground.

The only 'achievement' was to prevent the rise of democratic social movements that might cut across regional borders. How did this happen?

The new Constitution had two contradictory aims: first, to reestablish the leading role of the party in society and second, to accommodate genuine, growing forces for decentralization. Once again it was Kardelj who suggested how to break the links between the 'positive' forces of decentralization and the 'detrimental' forces of rising nationalism. His solution was to upgrade the self-management system to permit a shift of power from republics to communes and the enterprises, which "would emerge as the true foci of power, loyalty and identity, thereby transcending ethnicity."³⁴ In retrospect it is clear that the plan was doomed to fail because the privileged status of the republics and provinces had not been curtailed.

In theory, the new Constitution was founded on the dual sovereignty of the 'working people and the 'nations and nationalities.' But the channels through which 'working people' were supposed to enjoy their rights operated within republican and provincial structures, effectively doubling the authority of these at the expense of federal institutions. In his 1977 political testament, "The Development of the Political System of the Socialist Self-Management," Kardelj described the system in glowing, but revealing, terms:

In fact, we no longer have a classical federation or confederation, but rather *a self-management community of nations and nationalities of a new type*, which is not based exclusively on a division of state functions, but above all on common interests determined by self-management and a *democratic constitutional agreement among the republics and autonomous provinces*. In this way, the self-management system has given an entirely new, democratic quality to inter-nationality relations as well.³⁵

Tying self-management directly to the 'community of nations and nationalities' effectively vitiated its role in asserting the rights of working people. Defining the whole country as a "democratic constitutional agreement among the republics and provinces" implied that the "late Yugoslav federation was a permanently constituting and not a constituted state;"³⁶ in which unanimous consent of its sovereign components became the basic principle of political life.

This unanimous consent was not reached by vote, but on the basis of 'cooperation' among regional oligarchies. Even so, the natural corollary was the creation of a right of veto, as Koštunica has observed.³⁷ The Yugoslav state therefore had been reconstituted effectively as a confederation. The Chamber of the Republics and Provinces of the Yugoslav Assembly worked according to the rule of unanimous consent. The delegates, twelve from each republic and eight from each province, were obliged to represent the stands of their respective federal units (articles 286, 295, 296).³⁸ In the Federal Chamber, thirty members from each republic, twenty from each province, decisions were taken by majority vote. Still, delegates were beholden to their respective federal units. The practical result of this structure was equal representation in the federal assembly of all constituent units, irrespective of size. Larger units were under-represented, and smaller ones over-represented. The complicated procedure of political appointments was primarily concerned with ethnic mathematics, individuals appearing not as citizens, but as "atom[s] of national interests."³⁹ The members of the highest Yugoslav political body, the Presidency of the S.F.R. of Yugoslavia, were responsible not to the Federal Assembly, which only announced the appointments, but to republican and/or provincial assemblies -- and, more importantly, to their respective party committees. Republics and provinces were responsible for their respective development (article 251), and accordingly for the execution of the federal laws on their territory (article 273), and while the Yugoslav constitution required decisions to be taken by unanimous consent of the federal units, the republican constitutions, and even those of the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, did not need to be in accordance with the federal constitution. The requirement for amendments to the federal constitution to be adopted both by a two-thirds majority of the Federal Chamber, and by the legislative assemblies of all of the constituent units, led to constitutional impasse in the 1980s.

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 -- Yugoslav government -- because its decision-taking powers became tributary to the decision-making process at the republican level. The veto made it impossible to establish a hierarchy of power among different levels of government. This deprived the federal government "of the capacity to act as a collectivity with its own democratically articulated political will."⁴⁰

The Constitution of 1974 gave Yugoslav republican élites the form and the substance of national existence and political power. The resulting changes in the opportunity structure in Yugoslavia further undermined links between the republics and the federation. Regional leaders, as Klaus Beyme has aptly commented, no longer looked for advancement in the central government apparatus. Instead, they created new opportunities in their republics and provinces and within their respective ethnic or national contexts.⁴¹ At the same time, interpersonal relations at the federal level came to be guided by the iron law of the "ethnic key."⁴²

The 'ethnic key' was Tito's attempt to keep the federal centre from being dominated by one national group, *i.e.*, either by Serbs or a Croato-Slovenian coalition. Despite 'current nationalist fairy tales' about the Second Yugoslavia being dominated by the Serbs, the rigid use of 'ethnic key' assured an almost mathematically balanced distribution of federal posts among cadres from republics and provinces.⁴³ The purges in Croatia and Serbia in 1971-1972 had shown that Tito was equally hostile to any kind of nationalism. But the 1974 Constitution further essentialized the ethnic aspects of people's identities at the expense of civic ones so that, in Bogdan Denitch's words, "One unanticipated but in retrospect predictable result was that loyalties to the republics, which for the most part meant national loyalties, were kept high, while loyalties to a federal Yugoslavia were kept low. Even during Tito's lifetime it used to be said that he was the only real Yugoslav. That turned out to have been a bad mistake for which the present generations are paying."⁴⁴

The institutional changes of the 1970s allowed republican oligarchies to use 'ethnicity' as a legitimate basis for asserting claims both against each other, and together against the federal government. The 1974 Constitution granted republics and provinces state prerogatives, with concomitant control over resources. It became strategically more effective -- as Rakowska-Harmstone has observed for communist federations in general -- to aggregate interests on an ethnic base.⁴⁵ In the Yugoslav context, this strengthened the authoritarian elements of nationalism, as Alexa Đilas has asserted, "Being a communist dictatorship, Yugoslavia did not repeat the political development of (Western) Europe, which had seen a gradual evolution of liberal political culture and national ideologies. Instead, the Yugoslav communist regime tried to block any form of political pluralism. This prevented the evolution of national ideologies towards liberal cultural values."⁴⁶

Until the end of the 1970s, Tito's prestige and Yugoslavia's international standing in a world divided by the cold war were sufficient to hold Yugoslavia together, despite the emerging centrifugal forces. But Tito's death in 1980 and the economic crisis triggered by the oil shock of 1979 set in motion a fatal logic of disintegration. The squabbling 'fraternal' republican leaderships entered this decade with the double curse of authoritarianism and economic failure,⁴⁷ while, as Anton Bebler has maintained, the "confederal frame began to obtain political muscle and soon turned out to be the central instrument for dealing with political controversies in Yugoslavia."⁴⁸

The consequences of the institutionalization of Yugoslav (con)federalism became obvious in the late 1980s, fragmenting the country along economic, social, political, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious lines. The 1974 Constitution had precluded genuine participation of individual citizens in the political life of the country, making "a dissolution process the only political value that was given a proper chance to be articulated as a political program."⁴⁹ After 1980, Yugoslav citizens started to observe and participate in the articulation of ideas which challenged the legitimacy of the Yugoslav state, and

‘legitimized’ graffiti-like political slogans asserting the particular against the common identity, such as "Kosovo-Republic," "Slovenia, my country," "Bosnian spirit," "All Serbs in a Serbian Land," or "Vojvodinian identity."

By the end of the 1980s, the process had resulted in a predominant perception of Yugoslavia as ‘a forced community,’ and strategies abounded for creating independent and sovereign nation-states. But since Yugoslavia still enjoyed sovereign status abroad, republican national élites tended to express their ‘vision’ in terms of a joint life in a new, democratically reformed Yugoslavia.⁵⁰ Three main projects emerged in different regions: Yugoslavia as a confederation (Slovenia and Croatia); Yugoslavia as a federation (Serbia and Montenegro); and lastly, Yugoslavia as ‘something in between’ (Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Slovenian representatives were the first to articulate their vision of confederal Yugoslavia. Their carefully constructed 1989 proposal for an ‘asymmetrical federation,’ which with Croatian support became a ‘confederal’ model in the second half of 1990, rejected majority voting because of the Serbs’ demographic dominance in Yugoslavia. Instead, it adamantly defended the consensus principle and the self-determination and secession rights in the 1974 Constitution. Slovenian president Milan Kučan announced that "we will live only in such a Yugoslavia in which sovereignty is assured, as the permanent and inalienable right to self-orientation of all the nations ... where we will regulate common issues in a federal state according to the principle of agreement."⁵¹ Constitutional expert Ivan Kristan justified this stance in human rights terms: “The right of self-determination is one of man's immanent rights and freedoms ... The right of self-determination as a collective right of nation and as a right of an individual is receiving... new characteristics from the point of view of the correlation of the right of self-determination with other human rights: it is considered that the right of self-determination is a condition for the accomplishment of all human rights.”⁵²

Kristan's stand anticipated the future ethnic character of the Slovenian state, where the right to national self-determination was understood more in an ethnic sense than in the sense of a *demos*, *i.e.*, of citizens’ political rights. In the words of the new Slovenian Constitution of 1991: "[t]he principal right of Slovenian people to self-determination [relies on] the historic fact that Slovenians throughout centuries of [this] fight for national liberation have realized [their] distinct national identity and realized their statehood."⁵³

Croatian thinking was influenced by Zvonko Lerotić, a political scientist and later special aide to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman, who in 1985 had identified the federal republics with their respective predominant nations, *i.e.*, Croatia to Croats, Serbia to Serbs. He then proceeded to define ‘nation’ as synonymous with ‘ethnos and ‘*demos*,’ collapsing the differences between an ethnic and a democratic state. This enabled him to identify Yugoslav republics as both nations and ethnic states, even though, of all the Yugoslav republics, only Slovenia is ethnically homogenous.⁵⁴

The eventual Slovenian and Croatian ‘Model of Confederation’ suggested defining Yugoslavia as an agreement between independent sovereign states: "Yugoslav republics that as such [independent and sovereign states], are constituting [a confederation] on the basis of the right of nation to self-determination." Serbia and Montenegro flatly rejected this view, pointing out that, at least formally, Yugoslav republics were not sovereign entities. More importantly, since only Slovenia was ethnically homogenous, they believed that a confederal model would inevitably open the national minority question in Yugoslavia. Finally, they were offended that the proposal referred repeatedly to the European Community, but carefully avoided mentioning the word "Yugoslavia".⁵⁵

Serbia’s own position started from the idea that it had been deprived of its proper weight in communist Yugoslavia because of the special autonomous status which the 1974 Constitution gave to its provinces Vojvodina and Kosovo. Almost all Serbian representatives vehemently rejected any notion of

a confederal Yugoslavia, which they felt would lead to full disintegration of the country, and reduce more than two million Serbs living in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the uncertain position of a national minority, thus reopening the Serbian national question which was thought to have been solved by the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918.

For these reasons, the Serbian and Montenegrin proposal was for a Yugoslav federation, ruled by majority voting based on the sovereignty of citizens in federal units, "as in the case of any modern federation" (to use a phrase current in the Serbian media at the time). Despite its democratic phraseology, however, the Serbian and Montenegrin proposal did not take into account the complexities and historic differences of the Yugoslav republics and peoples. Its prime aim was to keep a state in which all Serbs would remain living together, but its majoritarian thrust made it look like a Procrustean bed 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 Bosnian and Macedonian presidents, Alija Izetbegović 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 center which would have similar functions to those defined in the 1974 constitution (i.e., ensuring a single market, guaranteeing human and minority rights across the whole of Yugoslavia, maintaining a common foreign and defense policy). In reality, their proposal was closer to the Slovenian and Croatian model in that it explicitly limited the right to national self-determination to those peoples who were already organized within existing Yugoslav federal units. Those living across republican borders (in effect, mainly Serbs and Croats) would become national minorities, as in the confederal model.

Despite the multi-ethnic configuration of the Macedonian and Bosnian populations, "Platform" specifically envisaged majority voting in referenda to decide on national self-determination.⁵⁶ In fact the Bosnian population - 43% Moslem, 31% Serb, 17% Croat and 6% "Yugoslav" according to the 1991 census - had already been polarized by the November 1990 election, in which nationalist parties received 90% of all votes cast.⁵⁷ Since the unicameral parliament operated by simple majority, any two of the parties could, without warning, outvote the third, marginalizing the national population it represented. In mid-1991, a tacit Moslem-Croatian coalition was formed. The Bosnian Serbs continued to back Serbia's federal model, and Izetbegović only aroused their suspicions by proposing a sovereign Bosnia as a republic of all of its citizens, since he had already rejected the idea of a citizen's republic when the Serbs had proposed it at the level of federal Yugoslavia. Despite its democratic phraseology, "Platform" was again written from a particularistic perspective that did not take into account the needs of the whole, but, in this case, only the interests of the Moslem and Macedonian nations.

So, at the end of 1990 and at the beginning of 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. However, since rule by consensus was still the alpha and omega of Yugoslav politics, it slowly became obvious that the impasse could be broken only by force. Unfortunately, the painful experiences of inter-ethnic wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the continuing tensions elsewhere have shown that painless transition from federal unit to independent state was possible only where national and republican self-determination coincided, i.e., only in Slovenia, the most ethnically homogenous republic in the former Yugoslavia.

In 1990, the process of national homogenization in the former Yugoslavia was complete. The first multi-party elections in communist Yugoslavia demonstrated that "national form" would triumph through

newly created ethnocratic regimes, so that the dissolution of the party-state would not only fail to open the door to democratic transformation (except in Slovenia), but also bring an end to Yugoslavia itself. Its geographic space would be divided among small nation-states basing their identity on a narrow cultural understanding of nationalism. This politics of identity would inevitably be anti-liberal, by treating citizenship rights not as rights extended to each member of society as an individual, but as the collective rights of a particular ethnic group.⁵⁸ One group of second-class citizens (the non-members of the oligarchy under Communism) would be replaced by another - the ethnic minorities in the new ethnic nation-states.

In conclusion, analysis of the constitutional and political background to Yugoslavia's disintegration suggests that ethnonationalism was built into the Yugoslav constitutional system from the beginning. When in the 1980s, republican elites defined national self-determination not politically, in terms of citizens' rights, but ethnically, in terms of group rights, they were closely following the Constitution. They recognized that insistence on "primordial" social, national and cultural differences in the country could be used to legitimize political power within their respective federal units. This insistence on the ethnic principle radicalized inter-ethnic relations in the country to the extent that the destruction of Yugoslavia became inevitable.

¹ These prophetic words were written in 1971. Qt. in Laslo Sekelj, *Yugoslavia: The Process of Disintegration* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

² Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1984), 38.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ See Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, "Communist Constitutions and Constitutional Change", in *Redesigning the State*, ed. R. Simeon and K.G. Banting (London: Macmillan, 1985), 216.

⁵ Connor, *The National Question*, 495.

⁶ Ibid., 36. Despite his instrumentalist use of nationalism, Lenin developed a thoroughly primordialist and essentialist definition of it, in which culture and language are important differentiating markers between groups. Lenin's ambiguous approach was continued by communist states, who nurtured the cultural aspects of nationalism, while maintaining a rational and anti-nationalist rhetoric. An appreciation of this peculiar blend of instrumentalism and primordialism in communist national policies is an essential prerequisite for understanding the persistence of nationalism in Eastern Europe, particularly in former communist federations.

⁷ Rakowska-Harmstone, "Communist Constitutions," 205.

⁸ "Classes, Party Elites, and Ethnic Groups, in *Yugoslavia: A Fractured Federalism*, ed. Dennison Rusinow (Washington DC: The Wilson Center Press, 1988), 67.

⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰ See Anthony D. Smith, "Communist Nationalisms", in *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Martin Robertson Press, 1979), 115-149.

¹¹ Qt. in Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, "Aspects of Political Change," in *Perspectives for Change in Communist Societies*, ed. Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview, 1979), 2.

¹² An excellent survey of the different stands of opinion in the Communist party of Yugoslavia regarding the national question in the years preceding World War II, as well as during 1941-1945, can be found in Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*, 128-172.

¹³ Iraj Hashi, "Regional Polarization in Postwar Yugoslavia and the Impact of Regional Policies," in *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*, ed. Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz (Stony Creek, Connecticut: Pamphleteers Press, 1994), 306.

¹⁴ Vojislav Stanovčić, "History and Status of Ethnic Conflict," in *Yugoslavia: A Fractured Federalism*, ed. Dennison Rusinow (Washington: The Wilson Center Press, 1988), 33.

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- ¹⁵ Dennison Rusinow, "Nationalities Policy and the 'National Question'," in *Yugoslavia in the 1980s*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), 134.
- ¹⁶ Paul Shoup, "Crisis and Reform in Yugoslavia," *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought* 79 (Spring 1989), 130.
- ¹⁷ Rusinow, "Nationalities Policy," 134.
- ¹⁸ Connor, *The National Question*, 224, 434-437.
- ¹⁹ Sekelj, *Yugoslavia: The Process of Disintegration*, 3-4.
- ²⁰ Rusinow, "Nationalities Policy," 134-135.
- ²¹ Qt. in Connor, *The National Question*, 440-441.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 537.
- ²³ Shoup, "Crisis and Reform," 130.
- ²⁴ For a detailed account of these years, see Rusinow's classic study *The Yugoslav Experiment 1948-1974* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
- ²⁵ In the case of Slovenia, only the top echelon of the "liberal" party was replaced. On the other hand, Tito thoroughly overhauled the party structure in Serbia and Croatia, presumably because he saw obedient party leadership in these regions as vital to the stability of the country. His sparing treatment of Slovenia gave it 20 years of uninterrupted political development, which helps explain its high level of political culture and tact during the crisis of the 1980s, and its relatively smooth transition from communism to a more democratic regime. The same period will be remembered in a totally different light in Croatia and Serbia. While constant internal political frictions characterized political life in Serbia, Croatia witnessed a full re-bureaucratization of social life. In both cases, communist as well as post-communist leaders were totally unprepared for the challenges that the collapse of the system posed.
- ²⁶ Rusinow, "Nationalities Policy and the National Question," 136.
- ²⁷ Qt. in Connor, *The National Question*, 226.
- ²⁸ Western accounts have emphasized the "liberal" credentials of the Croatian leadership, whereas they were "nationalists" according to orthodox Yugoslav opinion at the time. The orthodox view highlighted the fact that the Croatian "maspok" (mass movement) was based on the links between Croatian nationhood, Catholicism and the Latin alphabet. Obviously, such "cultural" nationalism could have been realized in practice only at the expense of non-Croat communities in Croatia.
- ²⁹ Jelena Lovrić, "Things Fall Apart," in Ali and Lifschultz, 279.
- ³⁰ Sekelj, *Yugoslavia: The Process of Disintegration*, 6.
- ³¹ Qt. in Connor, *The National Question*, 539.
- ³² "Communist Constitutions and Constitutional Change," 219.
- ³³ See Shoup, "Crisis and Reform in Yugoslavia," 132.
- ³⁴ George Shopflin, "The Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia," in *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*, ed. John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 190.
- ³⁵ Qt. in Vojislav Koštunica, "The Constitution and the Federal States," in Rusinow, *Yugoslavia: A Fractured Federalism*, 83. Emphasis added.
- ³⁶ Lidija Basta Posavec, "Federalism Without Democracy, Political Rights Without Citizen," in *Europe and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia*, ed. Radmila Nakarada (Belgrade: Institute for European Studies, 1994), 155.
- ³⁷ "The Constitution and the Federal States," 86.
- ³⁸ See *Ustav Socijalistike Federativne Republike Jugoslavije* (Constitution of the Federal republic of Yugoslavia) (Beograd: Rad, 1974).
- ³⁹ Koštunica, "The Constitution and the Federal State," 87.
- ⁴⁰ Lidija Basta Posavec, "Federalism without Democracy," 156.
- ⁴¹ Klaus Von Beyme, "Regime Transition and Recruitment of Elites in Eastern Europe," *Governance: An*

International Journal of Policy and Administration 6.3 (July 1993), 413.

⁴² The most thorough analysis of the "cadre policy" in Yugoslavia can be found in Lenard J. Cohen's lengthy study *The Socialist Pyramid: Elites and Power in Yugoslavia* (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1989).

⁴³ Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 38. The only exception to the rule was the ethnic configuration of the Yugoslav National Army, where the officer corps was 70% Serb. One of the reasons, according to Denitch, was that Montenegro and Krajina had contributed disproportionately to the partisan forces in World War II, so that many more Serbs continued in a military career, which in any case was less attractive in the more economically developed regions of Slovenia, Croatia and Vojvodina.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ The reasons for the "strategic efficacy of ethnicity" are discussed further in "The Nationalities Question," in *The Soviet Union: Looking to the 1980s*, ed. R. Wesson (The Hoover Institution Press, 1980), 129-155.

⁴⁶ "Hrvatsko-srpski sukob i liberalna demokratija (Croato-Serbian Conflict and the Liberal Democracy)," in *Srpsko pitanje* (Serbian Question), ed. Alexa Đilas (Beograd: Politika Press, 1991), 147.

⁴⁷ R. Blackburn, "The Break up of Yugoslavia and the Fate of Bosnia," *New Left Review* 199 (May/June 1993), 101.

⁴⁸ Anton Bebler, "Yugoslavia's Variety of Communist Federalism and Her Demise," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 26.1 (March 1993), 81.

⁴⁹ Basta-Posavec, "Federalism without Democracy," 157.

⁵⁰ See Slobodan Samardžić, "Prinudna zajednica i iluzornost njenog uređenja (A Forced Community and Illusion of Its Arrangement)," in *Prinudna zajednica i demokratija* (A Forced Community and Democracy) (Beograd: Akademia Nova i Institut za evropske studije, 1994), 116-119.

⁵¹ *Qt.* in Lenard J. Cohen, *Broken Bonds: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 62.

⁵² Ivan Kristan, "Self-determination as a Human Right," *Review of International Affairs* 978 (Belgrade, January 1991), 10.

⁵³ *Qt.* in Vojin Dimitrijević, *Neizvesnost ljudskih prava: na putu od samovlasca ka demokratiji* (The Uncertainty of Human Rights: From Autocracy to Democracy) (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića: 1993), 67.

⁵⁴ Sekelj, *Yugoslavia: The Process of Disintegration*, 246, 278.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁶ Samardžić, "Prinudna zajednica," 124-125.

⁵⁷ See Jovica Trkulja, *Osvajanje demokratije: ogled o komunizmu* (Coming to Democracy: An Essay on Post-Communism) (Beograd: Izdavačka agencija Draganić, 1993), 104-107.

⁵⁸ Vesna Pešić, "The Cruel Face of Nationalism," in *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 133.