

Tracing the Historical Echoes: *Former Yugoslavia's Impact on Contemporary Realities in the Western Balkans*

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TWO FALLS AND ONE WIN

On the chilly night of November 9 in 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall produced a seismic shift that echoed significant political changes in the history of modern Europe. It announced the arrival of freedom. East Berliners, fueled by decades of separation, rushed to a wall, and it fell. Another fall took place later, on October 5, 2000, in Belgrade. It echoed the same when a state leader fell by storming of the people into the federal parliament building. This event also created significant political change in the history of modern Europe.

On November 22, 1989, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl made a speech in the European Parliament after the fall of the Berlin Wall: "After almost three decades of separation, Germans have been able to celebrate reconciliation, a common identity, and unity." On October 6, 2000, the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, spoke at a press conference held in Washington, D.C. after the downfall of Slobodan Milošević's regime: "The Serbian people have spoken. They want to be part of the new democratic century unfolding in Europe and around the world."

On June 28, 1989, Milošević, the President of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, also delivered a speech to 1 million people, at the Gazimestan monument in Kosovo. This is the central celebration marking the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, where *Knez Lazar*, Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović was defeated by the Turkish Ottoman Empire army at the Kosovo field, on Saint Vitus Day: "Six centuries ago, Serbia hero-

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ically defended itself in the field of Kosovo, but it also defended Europe. Serbia was at that time the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general. Therefore, today it appears not only unjust but even unhistorical and completely absurd to talk about Serbia's belonging to Europe."²

The previous month, on May 6, 1989, the Yugoslavian pop group Riva won the Eurosong contest in Lausanne, with "Rock me baby".

BACK TO THE PAST

In 1989 territories of the Socialist Republic of Serbia and its Autonomous Province Kosovo were parts of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in the land of *Bratstvo i Jedinstvo* ("Brotherhood and Unity"). If we turn back the historical clock, 600 years before, on June 28, 1389, Yugoslavia did not exist. The territories of Kosovo and Serbia did. The *SFRJ* federation state emerged in the Balkans after World War I, in a region historically dominated by foreign empires.

The Ottoman Sultan Murad I also died on Kosovo Polje ("Field of the Blackbirds") and the Turkish army gained the victory. After the battle, the rise of the Ottoman Empire pushed out the crumpled Byzantine Empire in the east and aggressively expanded into the European continent, on the west, changing the region. Defeating Serb forces at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 led to three centuries of Serbian submission, with diverse ethnicities shaping the social and political terrain of the country. "Although it was a military loss, the Battle of Kosovo became a fundamental event in the formation of Serbian national identity."³

The Ottoman Empire expanded its control over the Balkans annexing territories such as Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro by 1499. It transformed the social milieu, particularly in Bosnia and Albania, where many converted to Islam.

As the Ottoman Empire entered into decline in the 17th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire expanded, particularly in 19th century, paving the way for Balkan nationalism.

2 Milošević's Speech at Gazimestan in 1989.

3 War in the Balkans: An Encyclopedic History from the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Breakup of Yugoslavia, Richard C. Hall, Chapter: Yugoslavia.

THE BALKAN SLAVS

The Treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 3, 1878, marked the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, imposing a peace settlement on the Ottoman government. Subsequently, the Treaty of Berlin addressed concerns and adjusted territorial arrangements in the Balkans, officially recognizing Serbia and Montenegro as independent sovereign states. Bosnia and Herzegovina's administration was handed over to Austria-Hungary, with the Ottoman Sultan retaining formal sovereignty. Croatia had already been a separate nominal state within the Austro-Hungarian framework since 1867-68.

The growth of national identity among Balkan Slavs drew on history, folklore, and religious heritage. Despite nationalist ambitions, these factors fueled ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 expelled the Ottoman presence, but unity collapsed. The nationalist act of Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb, assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, ignited World War I. The war's end saw the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, opening the door for Balkan nationalistic aspirations and the redrawing of national borders.

The peace negotiations at the end of World War I resulted in the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919, five years after the Sarajevo assassination. The treaty imposed penalties on the Central Powers, leading to territorial changes in the Balkans and the creation of new nation-states. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy provided an opportunity for the liberation of the Slavic population, leading to the creation of a modern multinational state of South Slavs.

The First Yugoslavia emerged after World War I, but the optimism for unity faded as the 1921 Yugoslavian constitution favored Serbian control. Non-Serbian discontent grew, leading King Alexander I (Karadjordjević) to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes on December 1, 1918, renaming it in 1929 as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Tensions escalated, culminating in Alexander's 1934 assassination in Marseille by Vlado Chernozemski, a member of the pro-Bulgarian Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, with support from the Croat Ustaše, a Croatian fascist organization. The attack claimed the life of the King and resulted in the tragic death of French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou. The ethnic, national, and religious landscape

of Yugoslavia remained complex up to 1946, comprising three main South Slavic ethnic groups—Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians, with recognition of Macedonians and Montenegrins as additional “constitutive nations,” forming a total of five.

THE STATE FROM JAJCE

The Second Yugoslavia was shaped by World War II. After Germany invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, the invasion led to the partition of Yugoslavia into smaller units controlled by Germany and its allies, as well as the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) under fascist rule, particularly targeting Serbian, Jewish, and Roma populations.

The World War II in Yugoslav territories involved the local Slavic population against Nazi Germany and its allies. The Proletarian Brigades were formed with soldiers drawn from across Yugoslavia, as a communist movement. The partisans were led by Josip Broz Tito, but at the same time there was another Serbian nationalist resistance movement, called Četniks, that had conflicts with the Partisans from the Proletarian brigades.

Eventually, the guerilla-warfare of the Partisans was transformed into the organized military force, internationally recognized by the Soviet and Western allies, led the country to freedom. In October 1943, their offensive resulted in the liberation the town of Jajce from Axis occupation, reinforcing the partizan influence in the region and laying political as well as legal foundations for the new State. It is estimated that 1.7 million Yugoslavs were killed in the war.

The foundations for the new Federal Yugoslavia were established there, in the second session of the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) in 1943, on November 19, providing the basis for the postwar Yugoslav state, with communist led government, strongly suppressing other political movements.

That meeting not only shaped the postwar Yugoslav state but also defined demarcation lines between republics. Serbs found themselves living in four different republics, and Serbia was further divided into the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Region of Kosovo-Metohija, balancing the dominance of Serbs among Yugoslav nations in the newly established Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ).

Before World War II and in the early post-war period, the Bosnian Muslim population was considered either Serbian or Croatian based on religious conversion during Ottoman rule. However, in 1968, they were recognized as a separate Muslim nation, formalized in 1971, leading to the recognition of Bosnian Muslims as a constitutive nation. This concept evolved into the later term “Bosniaks” to describe the Bosnian Muslim nationality.

YUGOSLAVIA DREAMING

Since the first constitution of the FNRJ was approved on January 31, 1946, notable for its treatment of ethnicities, it introduced a terminological distinction between “nations” and “nationalities.” The country underwent two more name changes, becoming the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) in 1963, with Belgrade as the capital.

SFRJ consisted of: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia. In addition to the six republics, there were two autonomous regions: Vojvodina and Kosovo, autonomous provinces within the Socialist Republic of Serbia. Yugoslav economic and political system, known as “self-management socialism”, also drafted in the 1974 Constitution emphasized workers’ self-management in enterprises, approving the decentralized decision-making to the republics and autonomous provinces.

The unity attributed to Marshal Tito faced challenges from dissidents critical of Yugoslav policies. Tito, the Secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, leader of the Yugoslav Partisans, and marshal of the Yugoslav army during the war, assumed the presidency after the war until his death in 1980. Recognized as a powerful figure domestically and internationally, Tito was considered the “father” of the “brothers and sisters,” influencing political, economic, and cultural processes. This perception of Tito’s Yugoslavia as a major global leader was endorsed by influential states and leaders, highlighting Yugoslavia alongside the USA and USSR.

After the death of the powerful “father” of the “brothers and sisters” the internal tensions, economic challenges, and broader geopolitical shifts in Europe led to Yugoslavia’s eventual breakup in the early 1990s. Tito’s funeral on May 8, 1980, drew leaders from over 120 countries, reflecting his role in the Non-Aligned Movement, depicting him as a

leader of a country that maintained independence from both Eastern Bloc and the Western Bloc.

Ten years after his death the Yugoslavia as a state died too.

On May 5, 1990, in Zagreb, Toto Cutugno won the Eurovision song contest with the song “Insieme: 1992.”

10 YEARS OF RUDE AWAKENING

Yugoslavia embodied the South Slavic dream of a unified state, resting on the official doctrine of “brotherhood and unity”. All Yugoslav republics, except Slovenia, which was predominantly inhabited by Slovenians, had diverse national and religious landscapes, with three major groups—Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Muslims. The awakening of that dream was brutal.

Since the 1990s, at the end of the 20th century, people of Yugoslavia engaged in various civil conflicts using uncivil language to put out the bright flames of the union. Their powerful and unique geopolitical and diplomatic position in the world during its existence from 1945 to 1992 dismantled, putting out a portrait of boogiemens digging ditches in the press.

The civil wars in the 1990s gathered significant international attention and media coverage seeking to explain and contextualize the crisis.

Tito’s policy of an independent course for Yugoslavia that aimed to balance relations with both the Western capitalist bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern socialist bloc, led by the Soviet Union, allowed Yugoslavia to receive economic and military aid from both sides.

The Yugoslav conflicts became central issues in U.S. and EU foreign policy, mass media, and academic discourse, especially that the break-up followed the afore-mentioned fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, marking the first major conflict in Europe after World War II during a new phase of European integrations. Simultaneously, the enlargements of the European Union and NATO were underway, collectively referred to as “Euro-Atlantic” integrations.

In 10 years, the idealized post-Cold War world of long-awaited peace,

shattered in the Balkan Peninsula. The conflicts officially ended with the last one, in 2001. By then, almost all independent states emerged as zombies on the European political stage, depending on the foreign transfusion, dressed in the same expensive suits they wore in the nineties, bought in Trieste. The flames of brotherhood depicted on the crest of Yugoslavia went out in bloodshed.

THE WAR FILES: SLOVENIA, CROATIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, SERBIA, KOSOVO AND NORTH MACEDONIA

The conflicts in the former Yugoslav republics unfolded with the Slovenian declaration of independence in 1991, leading to a brief war with the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), counting far less victims than those who followed. Concurrently, clashes erupted in the Krajina region between Croats and local Serbs, Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as the third parallel conflict, marked by the Bosnian Muslim and Croat population voting for independence in a referendum on March 3rd, denounced by Bosnian Serbs. In response, UN sanctions were imposed against Serbia for supporting rebel Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia. The siege of Sarajevo and the city's market shelling by Serbian forces, leading to 68 civilian deaths, prompted NATO to use force for the first time since its creation, in 1949.

After the massacre of 8000 men in Srebrenica, the Bosnian War ended after three years, on December 14, 1995, with the signing of the Dayton peace agreement in Paris. This agreement established Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single sovereign state, consisting of two entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. It also delineated territorial borders, addressed the return of refugees, and outlined a political structure with a rotating presidency representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs.

Yugoslavia's disintegration culminated with the Kosovo crisis, marked by NATO's 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then composed of Montenegro and Serbia. Kosovo and Metohija underwent significant changes in population, experiencing ethnic tensions fueled by economic struggles, demographic shifts, and police oppression. In 1981, ethnic Albanians, with the highest birthrate in Yugoslavia and Europe, made up 77.4% of the population, up from 68.5% in 1948. Despite financial aid, as a part of the Tito's policy, this territory remained underdeveloped, contributing to high unemployment and

ethnic strife, with the Serbian minority leaving the predominantly Albanian environment, responding to the resentment and occasional violence between them.

The culmination was the 1989s visit to Gazimestan. In response to secessionist aspirations, Serbian authorities curbed the province's autonomy, fueling nationalistic sentiments. Many ethnic Albanian members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in Kosovo and Metohija were expelled from the party, and measures were taken against those labeled as separatists, intensifying tensions.

In the early 1990s, as response, Kosovo Albanians developed parallel non-state groups, leading to the radicalization of the diaspora and the formation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The Kosovo Liberation Army's activities escalated in the late 1990s, as the conflict intensified in 1998, and ended in 1999 with NATO's intervention under humanitarian cause. At the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces Kosovo regained peace with the establishment of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) in 1999.

The conflicts of the former Yugoslav republics finally ended with the last conflict in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, now North Macedonia in 2001. It gained independence on September 8, 1991, with the peaceful breakup from Yugoslavia, marking it as "safe heaven".

Macedonia faced internal and external challenges, as it sought to build democratic foundations and establish itself as a subject of international relations. One of the country's key concerns was its relations with neighboring countries, particularly Greece and Bulgaria. The longstanding struggle for political influence over Macedonia between these nations contradicted the idea of Macedonian autonomy, especially regarding the Macedonia's state name and the Macedonian language. The relations with Serbia were on and off due to the countries support of the NATO "Determined Guarantor" operation.

The complexity and proximity of the situation in Kosovo was a significant concern for the Macedonian authorities. During the Kosovo crisis, 360,000 people, equivalent to 16 percent of the country's own population, sought refuge in Macedonia. The NATO intervention in 1999 further complicated the situation, with substantial support given

to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Some of the western parts of the country were used as logistics and training base for the “guerrilla”. On January 22, 2001 a group KLA supporters armed with hand grenades attacked local Macedonian police station, followed by a second one four days later. The NLA was told to leave the country, which it refused. The violence erupted and the state police and army responded. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed on August 13, 2001, officially ended the conflict, addressing inter-ethnic tensions, granting Albanian demands and establishing a framework for relations between the Macedonian and Albanian communities.

A year later, Karolina Gočeva represented Macedonia in the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest with the song “Od nas zavisi” (It depends on us).

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The inevitable break-up of Yugoslavia, once a federation of independent states under a soft dictatorship, unfolded into the emergence of independent republics and nations, accompanied by changes in names and border aspirations. The independent people kept the national identity, changed flags and anthems, presidents and rulers, gained internet connection and access, but they lost their national dignity.

The tragic toll of over 100,000 lives lost during the conflicts, fueled by nationalism and religious bigotry that spread through Yugoslavia like a pus, oozed out one country from the map and replaced it with seven, at already infected area. The brutality of the conflicts and war crimes committed by various parties contributed to a sense of national trauma across the region.

Some countries successfully transitioned to democratic governance, with Slovenia and Croatia joining the European Union in 2004 and 2013, respectively. However, the good neighboring relations between the two republics of former Yugoslavia, still have unresolved issues, such as the border disputes, which are a consequence of the fact that Yugoslavia, while having strictly defined borders with other countries, did not have precisely marked or defined borders among its constituent parts. Other former “brother” states have them too. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo faced political regress marked by ethnic tensions, corruption, and delay in democratic reforms.

The Western Balkans still grapple with democratic deficits, neglecting universal values, political culture, and confidence in elected leaders. Economic struggles, high unemployment, and inequalities contribute to social unrest, still hindering stability and cooperation. Efforts for reform are underway, evident in the EU's Growth Plan⁴, aiming to double the region's economy within a decade.

The discrepancies in the Western Balkans since the downfall of Yugoslavia underscore the complexity of managing the aftermath of a multi-ethnic federation's dissolution. Political, ethnic, economic, and regional factors contribute to the challenges faced by the individual nations in the region.

The EU expressed commitment to opening accession negotiations with Albania, North Macedonia, provided they adhere to the necessary criteria. Bosnia and Herzegovina may enter negotiations upon meeting needed criteria, and there is renewed momentum for Montenegro's accession with a new government. For Kosovo and Serbia, adherence to EU Dialogue commitments is crucial. The French President Macron stated on August 28, 2023, that the EU needs to reform if it wants to integrate new nations with more than 30 member countries. "The risk is to think we can enlarge without reform. I can testify that it is hard enough for Europe to advance on sensitive topics with 27 members. With 32 or 35 members, it won't be any easier,"⁵ he said at the annual gathering of French ambassadors in Paris.

The Open Balkans initiative, challenging the EU's Berlin Process, focuses on economic cooperation among Balkan countries, as a joint effort to progress. However, the future of the region remains uncertain, marked by ongoing transitions and challenges. The rise of ethnic tensions and nationalism during Yugoslavia's breakup left lasting effects, emphasizing the importance of learning from history, and building on friendship, trust, and cooperation, rather than divisive narratives, crucial for lasting stability and progress in the region.

The events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, and October 5, show that citizens need freedom, inclusion, and democracy, not speeches of praise, or taps either on shoulders or fingers. The regional, European and global political landscape is dynamic and subject to rapid

⁴ More info: News Article, 8 November 2023, Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)

⁵ Statement of French President Emmanuel Macron at the annual gathering of French ambassadors in Paris on August 28, 2023

changes. Those changes can lead to both political progress or decay, leaving space for the erosion of the democratic institutions, wars, and proxy wars.

THE FINAL REFLECTION

In 1987, the Irish singer Johnny Logan won the Eurovision song contest with “Hold me now” in Brussels. Yugoslavia placed 4th with the song “Ja sam za ples” (I wanna dance), performed by Novi Fosili.