

When the Walls Fell: The Political-Economy of Yugoslav Disintegration

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Going through the international press at the time when Yugoslavia was falling apart and war was escalating in Croatia in 1991 and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, an average consumer of news in the West must have been stunned by the brutality of violence. The same goes for many foreign diplomats. Coming from “western” countries governed by liberal democracy and institutional mediation of conflicts, many believed the scenes playing out in front of their eyes were representative of old ethnic and religious hatreds that haunted this territory for centuries (Cohen 1993, Gallagher 2007, Glenny 1996, Gutman 1993, Hislope 2007, Judah 1997, Judah 2002, Kaplan 1993, Keenan 1993, Rieff 1995). It might have only reminded them of some past events that their countries had to go through before becoming politically civilized, convincing them the same would apply for Yugoslav people. However, hardly anyone among the foreign officials would have concluded that perhaps the grim images they were witnessing were not the scenes reminiscent of some distant European past but symptoms foreshadowing their future (Močnik 2009, Stojanović 2018).

Today that future seems much closer than many would be willing to admit. Political instabilities in many “western” countries that are unfolding in ever more perilous way to a great degree recall episodes from Yugoslav past. Only to name the most visible parallels it is sufficient to point to the growth of social (often regional) polarization and neglect in the U.S. and European Union, debt trap as observed in Greece, political movements for regional autonomy or secession as seen in Spain, vicious cycles of social protests and brutal police repression that are unraveling in France, instability of weak governments as present in Italy or numerous appeals to nationalist resurgence by contending political actors. When analytically approaching Yugoslav collapse we should not treat as an event of the past. On the contrary, it is a symptom of our present.

Collapse of the Cold-War order

In the first instance, the Yugoslav past shows us how important are the international relations between states. Embedded in the world order shaped by the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and U.S., the Yugoslav leadership constantly had to adapt to the changing financial, trade and military conditions defined by the globally dominant powers, with little ability to influence it (Unkovski-Korica 2016). They dominantly relied on a liberal strategy but also responded to the constant developmental concerns coming from poor regions. Moreover, the military threats in international arena often shifted defense capabilities to the top of priorities.

In short, the aim of liberal reform policies was to stimulate growth and push Yugoslav firms to international market by liberalizing foreign trade, removing restrictions on prices and income, and withdrawing direct state investments in favor of banks. On the other hand, the development strategy focused on the investments in infrastructure, capital goods and raw materials, aiming to secure long-term stable growth. But this strategy also included satisfying the economic needs of the military, often allying the interests of defense and development in securing the support for economic policies in their favor. Since the productivity in these strategies is measured in different terms (market efficiency vs. social development), it implied different institutional arrangements (Woodward 1995a). Conflicts between the party representatives of these strategies (coming from different regions) could hardly be avoided, but as long as there was enough resources (mainly foreign development loans) to balance the thin equilibrium, they would be able to reach a compromise.

However, the size of Yugoslav economy in the world market was always its major disadvantage. Limited by its capacity to absorb external shocks, it was always very vulnerable to sudden shifts in international political and economic arena. This became obvious after the liberal reforms of opening the light industry to foreign competition in the early 1960s. Domestic implications hit hard: GDP continued to grow but at much lower levels, the trade deficit exposed the weaknesses of Yugoslav firms, unemployment rose, strikes spread, and emigration to Germany and France skyrocketed (Horvat 1985). Where social welfare was expected, inequalities and divisions came to the fore: between workers and managers, between enterprises, between industrial sectors, between branches, between urban and rural areas, between regions. Massive demonstrations erupted in Belgrade in June 1968 and in Kosovo the same year. Nationalist mobilizations swept Croatia during 1971 (the so-called “Croatian spring”). Instead of developing the socialist communities of work through solidarity, the Yugoslav society faced escalating divisions that often manifested in nationalist terms (Schult 2017).

Rapid liberal reforms intensified contradictions and slowed down economic development but also showed that the party could not mount a uniform strategy for resolving the social problems. At the same time, important political (the Six-day War in 1967, Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968,) and economic (Nixon ending the gold standard in 1971, stagflation in „western“ Europe) changes occurred in the international arena. Like bricks on a heap, historical events began to pile up unpredictably and unexpectedly. The Communist leadership lost control over the situation, felt threatened, and decided to assert its power through repressive means. It purged party leaderships in Croatia (1971), Slovenia (1972) and Serbia (1972) and clamped down on students, workers and even managers. During 1971-1972, market reform was toned down, financial system reformed and banks reined in (Flaherty 1982; D’Andrea Tyson 1980). What followed were the years of political *detente*, heavily debt-led development, and a strengthening of the middle class. However, the party leadership accepted many of the political demands that emerged in this period, embedding them in the last Yugoslav constitution of 1974, followed by the comprehensive reorganization of the economy in 1976 (known as the “consensual economy”) (Bilandžić 1985).

New shocks to the Yugoslav economy came in the 1980s after the U.S. Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker raised the interest rates aiming to curb inflation that shook the U.S. economy for years. This move also marked stark political and economic shifts

in the international financial institutions (the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) in the interest of capital, defining the international class attack that will become known as neoliberalism. The World Bank focused less loans to poor countries, while the IMF started pushing more strongly the programs of the so-called structural reforms along the lines of privatization of firms, liberalization of trade and deregulation of the financial sector (Duménil/Lévy 2011). Yugoslavia was strongly affected: all political and economic troubles from the 1960s came back with a vengeance.

Forced to repay the foreign loans, the Yugoslav government adopted a rigid stabilization program in 1983 as a precondition for the IMF stand-by agreements: wages were repressed, government budget and investments cut, companies forced to introduce hard budget restraints. Consequences were especially felt in poor regions that relied on heavy industries, mining or textile factories (Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia), causing numerous strikes and demonstrations (Lowinger 2011). Although the central bank tried to postpone bankruptcies by monetizing their debt, it only contributed to the spiraling inflation. Unable to secure monetary stability and only able to offer more austerity, the federal government had to rely on other instruments under its control to secure social stability: the army and police (Woodward 1991).

However, this approach came with great political cost. As the activities of the federal state were reduced to the coercive force, it only led to the decline of its authority and loss of its legitimacy. It also opened the space for republics' leaderships to assert their influence. Since the budgetary resources in republics was diminishing due to the fiscal squeeze, the quarrels between party leaders over the control of resources escalated: refusal of richer republics to transfer money into federal budget, introduction of protectionist measures to keep revenues at home, trade wars (Woodward 1986). It was not only that the party was breaking down. Divisions spread throughout all layers of the society. Workers protested and demanded the protection of their factories from bankruptcies. Dissatisfied with the situation at work, frustrated with political paralysis and angered at managers, but unable to affect the change, a sense of desperation grew among them and, with it, rebellion (Musić 2021, Cvek et al. 2019, Barić 2019, Lowinger 2011, Jovanov 1989).

However, it were the middle classes that led the way for the political transformation. Educated, skilled, urban, expecting an employment and status in accordance with their credentials, discontent about their diminishing wages in comparison to industrial workers, insisting on wider possibilities for their children, demanding the satisfaction of their consumer needs and cultural sensibilities, attacking political repression and non-productive expenses, encouraged from the new winds of change blowing in the socialist bloc, they wanted a change in their political, economic and cultural standard of living (Woodward 1991).

Although their social outcry for the freedom and democratization of society had a universalist claim, it was in fact being structured from the particular perspective of the "western" understanding of freedom and democracy (freedom of choice in plural political and economic markets). They wished to be integrated into the "western" normative bloc as a world of freedom. More precisely, they wanted to live the European dream that was being formed at the same time through the finalization of the European Union project. However, that idea of freedom, politically captured in the notion of a nation-state integrated in EU, was materialized in national political projects that led to wrecking of these territories (Buden 2020).

In the end, the corporate character of Yugoslav state – which the vanguard Communist party envisioned to keep the revolutionary alliance between industrial workers, peasants, small producers and middle classes in balance by rising purchasing power, stable inflation and avoidance of crisis – was rapidly falling apart. The federal system still existed, but its key political pillars – the Communist party and workers' self-management – were tumbling down. The gap between the collapsing institutional framework and the socialist ideology of brotherhood and unity grew so wide that the ideology could no longer preform its task: it could no longer contain the challenges to the legitimacy of the system within the prevailing parameters it set.

Nationalism leading the people

Nationalism did not suddenly appear in the 1980s, it was present the whole time, but restrained within the framework of dominant ideology, even punishable by law in its political expression. Its origins, in many studies on Yugoslavia as mentioned above, are often reduced to lingering historical grievances that from time to time grip the consciousness of people and cause great harm. Although it is analytically misguided to treat it in this sense, it is also foolish to disregard this historical context, since the Yugoslav territory was pervaded with poverty, inequality, crisis and national clashes that escalated to genocidal proportions during the Second World War (WWII) (Woodward 1977).

The leadership of the Communist party, which triumphed in WWII, could not ignore the destructive potential that laid in national conflict. They interpreted it as one of the characteristics of the prewar Yugoslav monarchy under the Serbian dynasty and decided during WWII to proclaim the new federal system. However, their organizational solution to divide Yugoslavia into six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) and two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina), following in large part the Leninist principle of the right of nations to self-determination, created a political arena in which economic claims between party representatives of that same republics and provinces could take a national form. Hoping to avoid an ethnic conflict, they initiated the organizational logic of the federal system that would favor nationalism (Woodward 1989).

Nonetheless, the economic quarrels over development loans, foreign exchange, taxes and control of resources would not become politically dangerous as long as they were kept within the confines of party cabinets and institutional forums. The situation changed in the late 1960s when stronger Yugoslav opening to international markets produced a social upheaval. In that moment, the political leaderships of the republics, started mounting a popular support for their economic goals, encouraging political participation and giving those goals exclusive nationalist character. It was a crisis of the system. However, the Yugoslav political and economic position in the world was still quite stable and the authority of the party in society anchored, so the federal leadership had enough power to assert internal control and purge leaderships in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. Although it could seem strange, it also accepted many political demands that emerged during the demonstrations, reorganizing the system of workers' self-management and strengthening decentralization. The one thing that characterized the Yu-

goslav leadership ever since it took power was its responsiveness to pressures, but in 1980s it only responded to the demands of foreign creditor in time when it was more needed to also acknowledge the demands coming from below.

In the 1980s the crisis came back like a wild boomerang but now with changed international conditions on its side. The quarrels over resources between party members of republics and provinces escalated, same as nationalist rhetoric (Magas 1993, Jović, 2009). Disagreements over the economic future and how to resolve the unraveling crisis stepped again outside of the party walls. However, in previous decades socialist ideology was still strongly supported by stable party structure and functioning economic system, while in the 1980s this was no longer the case. No part of the society could avoid being engaged in political conflict about the future of the Yugoslav state. In Gramscian terms, the communist hegemony, the political economic bloc formed during the 1940s, was crumbling down. Global economic realignment affected the Yugoslav internal order and posed a serious challenge to its leadership. However, it was unwilling to offer a response or make a decision that would alleviate, if not contain, the social conflicts.

Leaving the socialist institutions to fall apart, the ideological field was left to nationalist ideologies to offer solutions. Nationalism became the only medium through which the struggle for power was being wielded. However, its menacing potentials are neither straightforward obvious nor it is defined by the necessity to turn into a destructive force. In the form of economic nationalism, it appears so regularly that every society accepts it as a method of controlling economic assets (land, jobs, income and infrastructure) on a particular territory. In this regard, it is seen as an expression of democratic will and protection of sovereignty. On the other hand, manifested as cultural or religious awakening, it is more concerned with intellectuals demanding the freedom of expression and open discussion than the calls for cultural and ethnic encirclement. Additionally, “Western” governments often treat its resurgence in communist countries or in the countries of their enemies as an integral part of democratic revolution and support its advance (so-called colored revolutions). Beyond being ideology of an imaginary independent community on a certain territory, it is an empty signifier that can carry a vast number of political goals. While it always defines principles by which individuals are included into a community, forming their collective identity and simultaneously identifying the enemy, the intrinsic objectives of nationalism are very much fluid (Woodward 1995b).

These characteristics make it opposite to communism, which possesses the intrinsic goal of creating the classless society and by that is concerned with the quality of social bond rather than individual characteristics defining inclusion or exclusion (Woodward 1995b). In the multiethnic context of Yugoslavia, it is exactly the principles of exclusion that came to the fore and turned economic nationalism and calls for freedom of speech into full-blown movement for territorial sovereignty with ethnic principles of citizenship. What is often missed in the accounts of nationalist surge in Yugoslavia is how the contests over territory arose from the economic quarrels over financial resources and political divisions about institutional paralysis, not because of some ancient hatreds or uncivilized Balkan culture.

Although the leaders in republics and provinces were in the spotlight during the 1980s, they were not the driving force behind the nationalism (even Milošević in Serbia jumped on the wave that was already there). It was the middle class intellectuals located in the cultural institutions and newspapers, often assisted by the religious institutions (Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Mosques), who took the role of catalysts. The most vocal calls for nationalist mobilization were produced by national academies of science and art, national writers' association and national publishing houses. This should be understood in the context of one-party system where political challenge to the party and public communication of demands was strictly forbidden. However, the nationalist ideas could not be eliminated because they were integral part of the cultural institutions that dealt with national history, literature, memory and heritage. The aim of the Yugoslav state was not to squash national histories but provide them recognition under the auspices of socialism.

Even so, by eliminating every opposition to its rule, the Communist party made the cultural institutions the bedrock of resistance. In this context, it is not so unusual that dissident intellectuals became leaders of the nationalist movements and later prime ministers or presidents not only in Yugoslavia (Jože Pučnik in Slovenia, Franjo Tuđman in Croatia) but all over the socialist bloc (Václav Havel in Czech Republic). The bad news for Yugoslavia was that the intellectuals articulating the nationalist view often could not move away from the pure historicism of their perspective. They reduced their nationalist projects to myths and bedtime stories, inspiring those projects with the worst episodes from national history. They barely had any vision of the future, no plan, no prospect of development, just creating a nation-state around the exclusive identity bond that would eventually clash with other identities. Nationalism never moved beyond its pure form, no social content was envisioned.

However, even the rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia should be seen through glasses of international realignment. It was not only supported by the organizational logic of the system and the national cultural intuitions as the guardians of memory and heritage that were bent on providing a refuge and meeting point to nationalist intellectuals. Its appeal, primarily in Croatia and Slovenia, drew the strength from the process of Europeanization so the national movements in those countries strove to reproduce the consistency and homogeneity of European nation-states (Todorova 2009). It is the very reason why middle classes saw realization of their freedom through the optics of national ideology. National movements in Slovenia and Croatia were structured from the point of better life within a new, "western," European formation. Accepting this fluffy deception, they embraced the illusion that all states and citizens in EU are equal, measured by the same standards, without striving for greater power in their foreign political and economic relations (Buden 2020). Lessons about "western" freedom would be costly: it brought a dream of consumerist abundance but on a back of social destruction.

Creating nation-states in the neo-liberal era

Yugoslavia was not torn apart in civil war(s). Civil war presupposes two or more sides fighting for the power in the same state (as in the American Civil War, Spanish Civil War or Russian Civil War after the October revolution). This was not the case in Yugoslavia. Its destruction was the process of creating nation-states along ethnic lines and since those claims overlapped, the result was military conflict. Yugoslavia dissolved in at least 10 statelets: two in Croatia (Croatian and Serbian), three in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian), two in Serbia (Serbia and Kosovo), Montenegro, Macedonia and Slovenia. Perhaps the plan of the Milošević government was the most ambitious one with the aim of uniting all the Serbs in the same state, but the character of the Serbian nationalism did not much differ from other nationalisms. However, having the strongest military capacity under its authority the Serbian government also had the greatest responsibility in how to use it, failing at that.

The breaking of Yugoslavia also anticipated many similar conflicts all over the world (Georgia, Tajikistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Liberia, Zaire/Congo, Azerbaijan, Ukraine...), becoming a symptom of how the changed post-cold War international order shook the internal orders of many states. From the 1980s the whole international structure of trade, finance, aid and military support was changing and with it the stability of economy, state alliance of different social groups and authority of governments to govern (Woodward 1999). Relying on foreign financial resources to cover the trade balance deficit during the 1970s, the Yugoslav economy was exposed in the 1980s as the creditors came to collect their money. Cycles of recession caused the bankruptcies of companies, deteriorated the domestic tax base, undermined the social cohesion and enabled factional fights to escalate.

When Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed the *perestroika* reforms in 1985 it had enormous impact on Yugoslavia since the state lost its strategic military significance in the Cold War competition. The Yugoslav army had to be restructured and reorganized in accordance with the new circumstances. However, many of its commanders were not willing to adapt and in the final stages of break-up they stood on a side of one ethnic group against others, accepting Milošević's leading role and pushing Yugoslavia to a catastrophe. Although the international support for the last Yugoslav prime minister Ante Marković (1989-1991) eventually came, it was too little too late: in 1990 democratic parliamentary elections were already held with nationalist parties winning in all states. No matter how important is to emphasize the political and even individual responsibility of leaders involved in the Yugoslav disintegration and ensuing wars, it should not be overlooked how crucial are global shifts of political and economic power for states stability, making their collapse not a solely domestic issue.

The wars in Yugoslavia destroyed any semblance of the legal order that had been established in previous decades, supported by the developing urban middle-class structure and burgeoning civil society. The decades of development disappeared in the blink of an eye leading to massive crimes, atrocities and emergence of criminal gangs that were only loosely tied to the central command. They plundered local resources acting for particular interests, personal gain or vengeance, tactically shifting their alliances from side to side. Many disputed territories saw the rise of warlordism that substituted the legal order, controlled scarce resources, commanded production and trade, gave

permissions to loot, spread fear and instability, fortifying the informal bonds of obligation, exchange and solidarity. In places where at one time constitution and laws had governed the social relations, societies were in many aspects reduced to ethnic kinship relations and personal domination similar to those in feudal societies, individuals needing to rely on the family network for security and support (Woodward 1999).

The final tragedy of the wars in Yugoslav was its resolution that came not by the agreements of contesting sides but by the rising unilateral hegemonic power of the U.S. military. Deciding from 1993 onwards to back the governments of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina against Serb authorities, supported by the Milošević government, the U.S. government effectively concluded the wars in those states in 1995 (Woodward 1995b). In 1999, it intervened in Kosovo crisis by engaging in the bombing campaign of Serbia. The states that were finally formed in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina became very much the protectorates of international community. Few years later Boris Buden would rightly ask: “What is Bosnia today? A state? A nation? Democracy?” concluding that is the “site of the crime” (Buden 2000, xi). In European political landscape it only functions as protectorate and its citizen as political minors, but mostly when it is referred to, it concerns the victims of the war that always needed an outside patron. No future or democracy is ever envisioned there. Croatia had fared only little better but also under the constant supervision of the European Union.

Slovenia was not the only country that avoided full-blown military conflict but it is interesting because nationalist coalition that won elections in 1990 lost its power in 1992, with liberals and social-democrats taking the government for the next three terms. It is possible that similar would have happened in Croatia but the war completely defined the political constellation. What came out of the wars in Yugoslavia were, in Gramscian sense, national hegemonic blocs. The wars gave immense political strength to nationalist parties to take the leading social role. Looking at how they organized the social base of these blocs it becomes clear that in the first instance they relied upon the cultural and religious institutions to take a strong foot in the dissatisfied societies in the late 1980s (in Serbia Milošević inherited the infrastructure of the Communist party that eased even more the organization of his base).

Immediately after that, they relied on the financial capacities of the nationalist (even fascist) emigration and organizational knowledge of secret service. Finally, the wars enabled the complete capturing of the state that provided the financial resources to organize the large parts of the civil society (chamber of commerce, youth organizations, sport organizations, performative arts organizations...) and even more firmly ground nationalist ideology. Last but not the least, the powerful veteran organization gave the bloc a sharp edge. The social presence and strength of these subjects created a national bloc of middle classes, managers and workers that would steadily weaken in next decades. However even when the governments changed after 2000 and social democrats and liberal took government offices, nothing could challenge the nationalist ideological terms that were set. No ideological alternative arose, all the way to the present. Even liberal politics completely accepted the new reality. Nationalist bloc would only be superimposed by global hegemonic liberal order in the process of liberalization of trade and finance in the 2000s. However, tensions emerged in capital cities where new post-industrial liberal middle class would eventually be settled.

Transition to post-colonial state on European periphery

The wars in Yugoslavia did not only destroy social bonds between people but also enabled the ravaging of their material base of existence. The nationalist political leaderships engaged in the privatization of the economy from the early start, using the war as a cover up for a process that was nothing short of feudal exchange between the new political lords and their entrepreneurial vassals who sold the material assets (machines, buildings, cars, land) of companies to enrich themselves. However, when the nationalist parties lost power in the new millennium, the process of privatization continued only now under more formal and legal conditions and more in favour of foreign investors.

Liberal governments during the 2000s privatized the remaining companies in the state portfolio, parts of the state infrastructure (mostly national telecommunication companies), banks and hotels. In the process of accession to the EU trade was liberalized, financial sector deregulated and central banks made “independent.” Slovenia was the only country that avoided the most negative effects of the privatization shock therapy. It applied the gradual program of restructuring the economy by keeping the banks and the infrastructure under its control and producing relatively successful national capital. It joined the EU in 2004. Croatia entered in 2013 but like a beggar without any cloths left. Other countries are still in the waiting room of the process known as the “Western Balkans enlargement.”

The postcolonial state of affairs in states that came out of Yugoslavia does not mean, as Buden rightly points out, that these states were colonial before. It means they have ensured national sovereignty but at the same time lost the material base of social existence and deepened its political economic subordination to the western economic hegemony (Buden 2020). The growing urban middle class society governed by constitution and laws that had emerged in Yugoslavia has largely broken down. Many of those who could not cope with the new social conditions promoted by wars and post-war privatizations entered into the downward social spiral. Working classes have been utterly impoverished and run down. Many older people can hardly wait to find refuge in a retirement, resulting in the ratio between employed and retired that now often stands at 1:1. However, the younger and middle-aged generation had to adapt to new circumstances. Partial economic and social recovery came during the years of debt-led development between 2002 and 2008, however, the financial crisis of 2009, austerity politics in its aftermath and long protracted recession only brought new frustrations.

Political alternatives are hard to come by with the complete atomization and fragmentation of society ruled by the endemic fear: fear of the powerful, fear of the corrupted and selective justice system, fear of corporations and banks inclined to engage in unlawful business practices, fear of losing the job and fear of social innuendo. Outside of national identity and empty parades of sovereignty, these states have little to offer to its citizens. All of the institutions of public sector has been completely feudalized: they function according to political, nepotistic or clientelist criteria offering the entrance and advancement only to those who fit them, enabling the spread of corruption and strongly affecting the quality of the service. This transformation of public institutions into opportunistic nests has made this trait so often among those employed by them. On the other hand, the private economy mostly offers a low-wage employment. Living

between hammer and anvil, the youth emigration has exploded, but those who stay often descend into depression, anxiety, apathy, dissatisfaction and distrust.

Nothing new on the European periphery someone could remark. However, it was not always like this. It shows how easily societies can dive into an abyss when deprived of a stable social order. The Yugoslav example offers a valuable lesson to “western” states that their relative cohesion and stability could easily be taken away when social needs are not met, when conflicts are not resolved, when class gap is not closing, when governments suffocate freedom and democracy, and when the laws are not applied. Then the walls can easily tumble down.

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