

Yugoslavia provides a lesson in the art of the possible

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Lawrence Freedman looks at the limitations of European crisis diplomacy

THE tragic events in Yugoslavia have indicated both the limits and the possibilities of Europe's crisis diplomacy. The European Community's early efforts were hampered by its preoccupation with Yugoslav unity, which prevented it from threatening recognition of the breakaway republics in the absence of serious concessions from the Serbs.

It is no great act of statesmanship to regret violence and urge negotiation, nor to insist on respect for the territorial status quo and the rights of minorities, even when the two happen to be in direct conflict. The real challenge is to help the disputants towards the best available solution.

There was no reason why anyone should have been taken by surprise. The Slovenes and Croats had advertised their secessionist intentions for months. The constitutional deadlock was apparent in May when Serbia and its allies blocked the Croatian Stipe Mesic from becoming president.

As matters moved inexorably to a head, the international community proved incapable of much more than exhortations to all con-

cerned. The EC, coincidentally gathering for its Luxembourg summit, dispatched its "troika" (the foreign ministers of the past, present and next presidents of the Council) to Belgrade on Friday. The proposed deal — involving the confirmation of Mesic as the President of Yugoslavia and a three-month pause in the secessionist process — was one that, if promoted some weeks earlier, might have made a difference. As it is, the fighting has transformed the situation.

The military intervention confirmed Slovenia in its determination to free itself from the rest of Yugoslavia. At the same time the success of the Slovene resistance embarrassed and raised the stakes for the army, and encouraged the Croats. On Saturday the EC troika appeared to have cobbled together a deal; by the evening it had broken down. On Sunday they were back again; there was more night-time haggling and another, more cautious, expression of optimism for Monday. Today they are

back again, still trying to rescue their proposals.

With the contending forces dispersed, and uncertain lines of political control (Mesic is now notionally in charge of the army but seems unable to assert any authority), a cease-fire agreed at the centre is inevitably hard to implement. The terms of the cease-fire are critical, for they will determine

the balance of power for the three months of bargaining envisaged by the EC. This is why the army

could not tolerate the Slovene demand to abandon its equipment and give up the right to police borders. Yesterday's strikes by the Yugoslav air force may possibly have chastened the Slovenes far enough to make another attempt at a cease-fire feasible. But even if a full return to barracks is agreed, the more fundamental questions concerning the future of the Yu-

goslav federation still remain unanswered.

The experience offers several lessons for crisis diplomacy of this sort. First, in contemporary Europe the principle of non-interference in another's internal affairs is now honoured more in the breach than in the observance. It is no longer possible to ignore another's domestic upheavals. The me-

dia will provide instant coverage of violence; the banks will worry about bad debts; neighbours will

fear refugees and conflict spilling over national boundaries.

Second, any serious interference requires an active and continuing engagement based on a keen understanding of the nature of the crisis and formidable powers of persuasion.

Third, for the above reasons, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)

is of limited value. A minority of members can call an emergency session, but unanimity from all 35 members (including the state in question) is still required when it comes to matters of substance. It can therefore move only with difficulty beyond bland statements that applaud the good and deplore the bad.

Anything more meaningful is likely to reflect an agreement cobbled together by interested parties outside of the CSCE framework and then sent to the body for general approbation. The role being played by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Germany's Foreign Minister, in the guise of CSCE President indicates some possibilities, but his is a role that depends on a country of real weight holding that office, rather than the office itself bestowing authority.

Fourth, serious intervention in these sorts of domestic disputes can only come from those with clout, and in Europe this means the European Community.

Only the Community has the

mechanisms to take on local crisis diplomacy and the economic levers at its disposal to facilitate a deal. And when the EC does intercede, this must be sustained and followed through. On this occasion the prestige of a common foreign policy was put on the line without any guarantees that the brokered deal would be implemented as the troika returned to Luxembourg, leaving the disputants to sort out the details. Senior EC figures needed to be on the spot to iron out the ambiguities and ensure compliance.

The intervention of the EC in the Yugoslav crisis provides a glimpse of what its role could be, but it needs to be able to find ways of taking initiatives at the first signs of impending trouble. Even now it should be looking beyond the specific problems raised by Slovenia and Croatia to those raised by Macedonia and the province of Kosovo. If the international community has had so much trouble coping with conflict in a modest-sized country such as Yugoslavia, imagine the problems if the next test case turned out to be the Soviet Union.

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