

Underdog complex fuels Serbia's right wing



Slobodan Milosevic

THE Serbs are in a paradoxical position. They are seen by almost all the other members of the Yugoslav federation as the dominant group yet they always perceive themselves as the underdog.

Serbia's most notorious politician, Slobodan Milosevic, achieved extraordinary popular acclaim in Serbia by exploiting those resentments. As Serbia's Communist Party leader, he launched a campaign which effectively sought to disenfranchise the 90 per cent Albanian majority in the autonomous province of Kosovo — thus restoring Serbian "dignity".

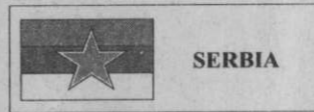
The retaking of Kosovo was seen as a kind of historic mission. Although few Serbs have visited this impoverished area, most still see it as their "heartland".

Before the Second World War,

the dominance of Serbia in Yugoslavia, created in 1918, was explicit: it was the Serbian monarchy which ruled the roost. But during the war, Serbs in Croatia suffered appalling losses at the hands of the *Ustashe*, the pro-fascist puppet regime in the republic. Tens or even hundreds of thousands died in what Serbs still describe as "hidden genocide".

The suffering at that time provides ample propaganda for the present. The elected government of Franjo Tudjman in Croatia is described as if he were the direct successor of the *Ustashe*. (Mr Tudjman, though no *Ustashe* himself, does not help by refusing to condemn the historic atrocities).

After the Second World War, Tito sought to create a Yugoslavia which would be free of domination by any one ethnic group —



hence the rotating leadership which Serbia sabotaged six weeks ago by refusing to allow a Croat president. None the less, the federal capital was in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and the Serbs were dominant both in the officer cadre of the army and the diplomatic corps.

With multi-party elections throughout Yugoslavia in 1990, Communists were voted out everywhere except in Serbia and the republic's closest ally, Montenegro. After the collapse of communism, most republics were queasy about continuing with a federation where Serbia remained

dominant and appeared to drag them down.

There were similarities with republics of the Soviet Union wishing to break away from Moscow. But, unlike Russia, Serbia has no popular figure such as Boris Yeltsin who rejects the Communist heritage and renounces his country's right to command. Serbia does not even have a Communist reformer such as Mikhail Gorbachev. Serbian liberals, such as the presidential candidate, Ivan Djuric, gained only a tiny percentage of the vote in last year's elections.

A more popular Serbian opposition figure, Vuk Draskovic, is himself sometimes sharply nationalist.

Meanwhile, support is growing for the far-right leader, Vojislav Seselj, whose followers believe

that routine violence against Croats is acceptable. Part of the large Serbian minority in Croatia has been in a virtual state of war against the Croatian authorities, whom they reject as "*Ustashe* terrorists". The Croats, in turn, call the Serbs "Chetnik" (extreme right) and "Bolshevik".

In contrast to the growing support for democratic politicians in Russia, there is as yet no hint that Serbs are ready to come to terms with a change in their dominant status. During last year's elections, liberals such as Mr Djuric expressed the hope that, with the economic collapse of the system, the Serbs would eventually rebel against the broken promises of nationalist communism and would feel the need of moderation and compromise. There were anti-government demonstrations in March

which suggested, briefly, that he might be right.

Now, however, there is a strong anti-communist backlash — but nothing to replace it with except the old feeling that Serbs have somehow "lost out". Many Serbs feel about the Slovenes and Croats as most Russians felt about the Balts until recently — that they deserve their comeuppance.

There have been some protests in Belgrade by mothers whose sons have gone to fight. But there have been none of the mass opposition demonstrations which Moscow saw after the crackdown in Lithuania in January — as the army columns streamed out of Belgrade towards Slovenia and Croatia yesterday, passers-by constantly waved and cheered.

Steve Crawshaw



Vuk Draskovic