

Blood at Europe's margins

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The West misread the signals; it must not now allow war to stifle Slovenia's independence, says Tomaz Mastnak

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Yugoslav soldiers near Zagreb: the army's brutality has wrought an irrevocable change in the Slovene mentality

tion and its political representatives, were actually the forces that have succeeded in capturing the remnants of the Yugoslav federal structure. In addressing them as the Yugoslav representatives, the West, *de facto*, strengthened one of the conflicting parties — the violently anti-democratic one.

The war in Slovenia has not finished. The ceasefire agreed during the first visit of the EC "troika" was a fake. The army resumed its attacks as soon as Western diplomats left. The EC ministers had to return, the agreements were reaffirmed; they left, and the army is still violating the accords.

But the army's agreement to stop hostilities was more than just a *ruse de guerre*. That is the way politics is conducted by Yugoslav communists. Keeping promises has never been a virtue among these modern-day practitioners of Byzantine intrigue. If Western diplomats do not take this into account, they will be fooled again and again, and the bloodshed will continue.

Because there is no authority left in Yugoslavia that could stop the hostilities, the necessary condition for a binding ceasefire is the presence of a Western mediation and monitoring body. Only this can make possible the army's return to its barracks and prevent further violence. The West has a decisive role to play in creating the space in which political talks about the resolution of the crisis could take place. This is not expected to bring political solutions, but to bring *politics* back to Yugoslavia. But renunciation of independence by Slovenia and Croatia cannot be a pre-condition of political negotiation.

I have recently argued against the Slovene drive for independence. I found it politically unwise, mainly because it did not take Western incomprehension of Yugoslavia into account. But since the Yugoslav army's intervention in Slovenia, I am convinced that there is no way back. Before the war, Slovenes were "anti-Yugoslav" in an abstract sense — they did not like Yugoslavia because it presented a barrier to living a better life. The army's intervention and its incomprehensible brutality, however, brought about a radical and irremediable change in mentality. People now do not simply reject Serbian communism with a fascist face, which has brought the country to war. People hate Serbs, and the hatred is such that it would implode any imaginable form of Yugoslavia imposed on them.

The West will now have to recognise Slovenia as an independent political entity. The sooner this happens, the better the chances will be for other forms of integration in the Balkans. The argument that this will be a precedent for other independence-seeking nations has been invalidated. Many unprecedented things are happening. Europe is being reshaped, that is the reality. And even if this were not the case, the refusal to recognise Slovenia's independence would endorse a precedent of another kind; the conscious stifling of independence through war. It is in Europe's interest to prevent it, or it will itself drown in blood spilled at the margins.

The author is a fellow at the European University at Florence and a member of the democratic opposition in Slovenia.

The war in Slovenia did not have to happen. A main reason for its having done so lies in the failure of Western diplomacy. This is now becoming clear in the West, although the velocity and clarity of the recognition vary from country to country. There are no doubts about it in Germany and Italy, and the Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, has stated that the failure of Western governments was "gross". In Britain and, particularly, the United States, the rethinking of attitudes towards Yugoslavia seems to proceed at a slower pace, yet their positions have clearly shifted.

To a benevolent observer, the war in Slovenia is just another vindication of the maxim that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Western governments' insistence on the preservation of the integrity of Yugoslavia was accompanied by meek demands for democratisation. But their support for the Yugoslav federation strengthened the forces that have successfully striven to block political and economic reforms in Yugoslavia and thereby brought the country to civil war.

It is no secret that it was the Serbian government that gradually and systematically destroyed Yugoslavia. It blocked and rejected all the initiatives by Slovenia, joined later by Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia, that aimed at a remodelling of the common Yugoslav state. It denied the basic human rights and civil liberties of the Albanians in the province of Kosovo, it began to instigate the Serbian minority living in Croatia (which had at that time just abolished the communist regime) to claim autonomy and rights. This autonomist movement soon formed its own armed units (boasting of their friendly relations with the Yugoslav army) and began to demand secession from Croatia.

Belgrade did not speak in diplomatic language. Yugoslavia was to be a Serbian-dominated federation (Serboslavia) or Serbs would form a "Greater Serbia", a state encompassing not only all the territories in which Serbs live today but also those they claim as their "historical dominion". The prelude to this had to be war, for "the Serbs have always been winning in war and losing in peace" (as the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences reads).

As crass as those developments were and as easy as it was to predict what they were leading to, Western governments were still not inclined to distinguish between the preservation of a unitary state and the Serbian drive to dominate the federation. They failed to recognise that the conflict was between those who strove to democratise and modernise the country and others who were willing to use any means to preserve the political and economic structures of the communist dictatorship. Decision-makers (and, all too often the media) in the West preferred to talk about ethnic strife along the lines of the explanation fabricated in the mid-Eighties by the Yugoslav political police, army and militant communists, headed by Slobodan Milosevic.

What was actually taking place was the decline of communism. But while the West rejoiced at its collapse in Eastern Europe it wished to avert it in Yugoslavia. A popular argument was that the dis-

mantling of the state shaped by Tito would lead to ethnic hostilities. This had to be prevented. In fact, the reverse was true: the insistence on the maintenance of the communist model generated national and nationalist conflicts.

Nationalism in Yugoslavia, it is true, grew in strength and importance in the late-Eighties and Nineties. Yet the story is complicated. In Serbia the communists mobilised a mass nationalist movement to gain new legitimacy. This nationalism presented itself as "pro-Yugoslavism". Because democratisation was attacked in nationalist terms, it began more and more to defend itself in nationalist language. These nationalisms were denounced as anti-Yugoslav, "separatist". When nationalism gained a momentum of its own, it became increasingly difficult to see what was at the root of the conflict. What is striking is that the West found it easy to accept the explanation offered by one of the conflicting parties — the one that happens to reign in Belgrade.

A still more surprising failure of Western diplomacy is that it has not understood that Yugoslavia has ceased to exist as a state. It has been, and is now, a state of affairs, not a state.

The greatest problem was not that Western politicians talked to an illegitimate, unelected government accountable to no one; this happens in politics. It was, and is, that the federal authorities do not represent Yugoslavia in the material sense of the word. Since the dissolution of the Yugoslav League of Communists, there have been no functioning federal political institutions. The Federal Presi-

dency has vegetated, manipulated during the mandate of the Serbian president, and was finally dissolved last May when the Serbian-led faction blocked a Croat, Stipe Mesic, as the next president. It took a war and two European Community missions for Mr Mesic to be instated, yet now the Slovene representative refuses to go to Belgrade until the war stops. The Federal Assembly did meet, but only to show how powerless and corrupt it was.

In addition, several Albanian representatives from Kosovo were excluded and Slovenes withdrew almost completely. The Federal Executive Council has no real power and the more the federal Prime Minister, Ante Markovic, tried to obtain some by playing factions off against one another, the more credibility he lost.

The Yugoslav army was the means chosen to fill the political and institutional vacuum. Yet the army only aggravated the crisis and, indeed, ceased to be a Yugoslav armed force. It has always been dominated by Serbs, who are over-represented in the officer corps. Moreover, the generals are not reconciled to the collapse of communism and have sided with Mr Milosevic, the head of the last authentic bastion of communism in Europe, Serbia. The army is perceived by all the conflicting parties as the Serbian army. Slovenia and Croatia have stopped sending recruits. Mr Markovic, flirting with the generals, has finally had to admit (during his visit to Ljubljana on Sunday) that he has lost control over the armed forces. What has appeared to Western governments to be the Yugoslav federa-