

# Serbia hints at flexibility on secession

THE RULING Communist Party in Serbia, Yugoslavia's largest republic, is indicating that it may shift its position on whether Slovenia should be free to leave the country. Once dogmatically insistent that Yugoslavia's integrity was a paramount interest of Serbia, the Communists now appear to regard the defence of ethnic Serbian minorities in other republics, notably Croatia and Bosnia, as a higher priority.

The party, which renamed itself the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) last year, issued a statement on Wednesday signalling the change in thinking. "Serbia has nothing against the secession of Slovenia. It does no harm to our interests, and we have no reason not to accept the separation if

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From Tony Barber  
in Belgrade

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it is conducted in a peaceful manner," the statement said.

The intentions behind Serbia's actions are not easy to read. The Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic, has said almost nothing in public since the crisis erupted on 25 June. His preferred course is to pull the strings behind the scenes and let the puppets in his team take the blame if Serbian policies misfire. He did not sign the statement.

All one knows, to judge from his record since 1987 when he and his supporters overran the Belgrade Communist Party organisation and took over Serbia, is that he is

committed to the cause of Serbia and ethnic Serbs. Sometimes this takes a violent form, as in the repression of ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo.

It is not known to what extent, if at all, Mr Milosevic plans his moves in collusion with the Communist Serbian generals of Yugoslavia's high command, but a degree of co-operation seems likely as the largest military deployments seem intended to secure Serbia's borders and perhaps later to protect the 600,000 Serbs who live in scattered communities in Croatia.

Serbia's Communists also share the army leaders' contempt for the federal government of Ante Markovic, the Prime Minister. The SPS statement demanded

that Mr Markovic be held responsible in the federal parliament for the country's upheavals, saying he was "responsible for the fighting and bloodshed and the completely unjustified deaths in Slovenia".

Although Serbia has acknowledged that each republic has the theoretical right to secession, it may be significant that the statement appeared just as America and the European Community indicated that they may recognise the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. Serbia now has an interest in appearing flexible.

This interest in showing a desire for compromise appeared last weekend when Serbia lifted its objections to Stipe Mesic, a non-Communist from Croatia, becoming president of Yugoslavia.