

Milosevic seeks to turn vision into a reality

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Carving Greater Serbia out of Yugoslavia promises to be a bloody process, writes Judy Dempsey

WHILE diplomatic activity is focused on resolving the conflict over Yugoslavia's external borders, a more bloody dispute — over the country's internal borders — is in the making.

"Whether or not the west wakes up to what is really happening in Yugoslavia, they are about to witness a most terrible and bloody end-game engineered by Slobodan Milosevic," says a Yugoslav observer. His view is that the violent events unfolding in his country can no longer be halted, because Mr Milosevic, president of Serbia, is set on creating a Greater Serbia.

The first step in the process was the Serbian-engineered deadlock in the federal presidency on May 15, when the Croat Mr Stipe Mesic was blocked from assuming the post. Mr Mesic, as president, would have become commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and would have been able to rein in the army. With the deadlock, the army was out of federal control.

It was the Slovenes who found this most alarming and felt it was impossible to remain in Yugoslavia as long as Serbia controlled the political agenda.

"Slovenia no longer trusted Serbia," said a Slovene minister. "On the night of May 15 we knew there was no point in talking about a federation, or a community of loose sovereign states, let alone staying in Yugoslavia. We knew that Milosevic was bent on creating a Greater Serbia at any expense. We wanted out. And fast. We

smelt evil and violence in the air."

Slovenia's government, buoyed by its citizens' mandate last December to press ahead with independence, accelerated the process of changing its constitution, and drawing up economic and political laws to distance itself from the federation.

Slovenia's declaration of independence on June 25 provided an opportunity for Mr Milosevic to use the federal army, and the Chetniks, the ultra-right wing royalists, to pursue his goal of a Greater Serbia.

The army remains determined to pursue its goal of securing all Yugoslavia's external borders. Thus, Slovenia's control over its external borders through its declaration of independence and the rebel republic's humiliation of federal units, dealt it a double blow.

While the army tried last week to force Slovenia into submission, Mr Milosevic continued plotting with the intention of fomenting instability in Croatia. The Chetniks were more than willing to oblige.

Over the past six months, the Chetniks, under Mr Vojislav Seselj, have been organising the ethnic Serbs in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. They share Mr Milosevic's goal: a Greater Serbia.

The Chetniks, who are recruiting volunteers for their own army in Serbia, have reawakened the latent hatred between ethnic Serbs and Croats living in Slavonia, east-



ern Croatia, and in the Serb-inhabited Krajina, south-eastern Croatia.

"Milosevic, through the Chetniks, wants to create a climate of fear and ethnic unrest in Croatia, so that the Croatian government will be forced to make a deal with Milosevic before blood spills into the rivers," a Serb intellectual commented.

The Serb-dominated army has played a crucial role in fitting in with Mr Milosevic's plans. By trying to teach the rebel republic of Slovenia a lesson, the army wanted to show Croatia that it would not allow that republic to secede. But its goals have begun to shift in the direction of Mr Milosevic's.

Heavily-armed federal units are now positioned close to the ethnic Serb communities in Croatia, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina. These units, made up of nationalist Serbs, are there precisely to protect the Serb

minorities from the Croats.

Mr Milosevic hopes that fears that the army will fight on the side of the Serb minorities in Croatia will force the Croatian government to the negotiating table.

This may seem ironic, since Serbs and Croats harbour deep historical hatred towards each other. However, Mr Franjo Tudjman, the nationalist president of Croatia, and Mr Milosevic, share the same goals. Each wants the respective Croat and Serb minorities incorporated into his respective republics.

Realisation of these goals would involve a radical redrawing of Yugoslavia's internal borders. Indeed, Borba, the pro-federal government daily, reported last March how Croatia would cede parts of Serb-inhabited regions of Croatia to Serbia. In return, parts of western Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which ethnic

Croats live, would be attached to Croatia.

The impact among the Moslem community of any carve-up of Bosnia-Herzegovina would be enormous. The Moslems, which make up 43 per cent of the republic's 4.7m population, regard Bosnia-Herzegovina as the guarantor of their security and rights as a recognised nationality.

Mr Alija Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and a Moslem with close contacts with Libya and Iran, has warned repeatedly against any dismemberment of the republic. For their part, the Moslems, who are also heavily armed, would fight to defend the territorial integrity of their republic.

The federal army might support the Milosevic/Tudjman prognosis, because the army is now dominated by nationalist Serbs, and because the country's external borders would

remain intact.

Furthermore, assuming Slovenia's declaration of independence stands, the army will back down from occupying Slovenia again if it can seek guarantees from the European Community, and Yugoslavia's political leaders, that the future status of Slovenia's borders will be negotiated.

However, the realisation of a Greater Serbia contains many uncertainties. It is not certain that either Mr Milosevic or President Tudjman can prevent the violence between ethnic Serbs and Croats in Croatia from escalating into a full-scale civil war, in which the Serb dominated army would side with the ethnic Serbs.

This would leave many questions unanswered. What future role, for instance, would the army play? After a bloody ethnic/civil war, would it return to barracks, content that it had temporarily secured the country's borders, as well as having secured a Greater Serbia?

What would happen to the Moslems, who have not forgotten how in 1918 they were used as pawns by Serbia and Croatia, and who now see their status as a nation being undermined by these two republics? How would the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo react to living as second-class citizens in a Greater Serbia?

If anyone held any illusions that reining Slovenia in, or reaching a temporary compromise over the republic's external borders, would ensure peace, the future is likely to disabuse them of such notions.