

Bellicose Milosevic raises the war stakes

A blend of communism and nationalism has made the Serbian leader a hero, writes Tony Barber in Belgrade

WHEN he finally spoke, it was in characteristically forthright language. Slobodan Milosevic, the communist President of Serbia, made almost no public comments on the Yugoslav crisis after Slovenia and Croatia declared independence on 25 June. But his statement on Belgrade television and radio on Saturday may have brought closer the prospect of the second war this century between Serbs and Croats.

Calling on Serbia's citizens to prepare for war, he denounced "all those who are bent on persecuting the Serbian people" and warned: "The Serbian people have throughout their history never waged wars of conquest but have always been victorious when fighting for their own freedom."

He implied that Slovenia could secede from Yugoslavia, if it was peacefully done, but that this was a special case, because almost no Serbs lived there. In Croatia, by contrast, he said the Serbian-led Yugoslav army should go in to protect the 600,000 Serbian minority.

Mr Milosevic, 49, a former banker and the son of an Orthodox Serbian priest, has ruled his republic, first as leader of the then Communist Party, and then as President, since 1986. He uses Western rhetoric about democracy, a market economy and citizens' rights, but his style and methods are those of classical communism combined with Balkan nationalism.

The personality cult that began to spring up around him three years ago was not entirely manufactured. Hundreds of thousands of Serbs attended rallies where pictures of Mr Milosevic were held aloft next to portraits of medieval Serbian heroes. "Slobo, Slobo" was the chant.

The pop singer Snezana Petkovic put out a cassette, based on songs about him, called *Slobodan, Dear Brother*. The Bosnian newspaper *Oslobodjenje* commented: "Slobo is a real star of stars and no longer a political one at that. He is also a showbiz star of the first magnitude."

At the same time his wife, Mirjana, became increasingly prominent. In 1989 she was elected to the ruling body of the Belgrade city Communist Party. A sociology professor, she is now the ideologue of the League of Communists-Movement for Yugoslavia, a hardline party set up last year by communist stalwarts.

The main reason for Mr Milosevic's popularity in the late 1980s was his crackdown on ethnic Albanians in the southern province of Kosovo. They had enjoyed autonomy under Tito's 1974 constitution and outnumbered Serbs by nine to one in a region regarded by Serbia as the cradle of its culture.

Last year Serbia's Communists renamed themselves the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), like other Eastern European parties trying to persuade newly-liberated electorates that they had turned overnight into sincere democrats. Many in Serbia were sceptical. "Milosevic and his party have changed their clothes but deep in their hearts they are still Bolsheviks," said Vuk Draskovic, the leader of the opposition Serbian Renewal Movement. Mr Draskovic lost heavily to Mr Milosevic in a contest for Serbia's presidency last December, and the SPS swept the parliamentary elections, taking 194 of the 250 seats in the republican assembly.

Foreign observers cited widespread manipulation of the elections and the Serbian media were heavily biased in favour of Mr Milosevic, and there was intimidation of opposition parties and voters. However, Mr Milosevic clearly touched a chord with much of the electorate.

He is now turning his guns on Croatia, whose Serbian minority, about 12 per cent of the republic's population, faces the same danger in his view as the Kosovo Serbs. The Serbs of Croatia have already declared their independence and want to be formally joined with Serbia proper. Mr Milosevic, clearly in co-operation with the army, has now indicated he is ready to extend Serbia's protection to them. In so doing, he has virtually written off Yugoslavia's survival as a united state and raised the risk of a Serb-Croat bloodbath to perilous levels.