

Determined Slovenians moving step by step towards becoming Europe's newest state

THE GUARDIAN 12/7/91

Ian Traynor explains why the republic's apparently easy victory is unlikely to be repeated in other conflicts looming in the Balkans

TWO weeks after rebuffing a bungled — though admittedly restrained — ground and air assault by the Yugoslav federal army, the Slovenes appear to be getting away with it.

They are too canny to brag, but in the offices of Ljubljana and the cottages of dreamy mountain villages, there is a quiet resolve among people, all the firmer because of the blood that was spilt, to move in stages towards becoming Europe's first new state in decades.

This stoical mood has expressed itself in the lack of public demonstrations and relative lack of pomp and flag-waving during the showdown, and in the fact that few people fled the republic when the federal MiG fighters were scrambled and the tanks rolled.

Despite the compromise that allows Belgrade joint custody of Slovenia's borders and customs posts for 90 days, the new signs at the frontiers ushering visitors into the Republic of Slovenia remain cemented into the ground. The new Slovene flag continues to fly from the steeples of the little baroque churches that decorate the mountains.

The resolve is tinged with a healthy dose of scepticism as to whether the generals have given up. But the tank warfare practised by the Yugoslav army was shown to be no match for a

motivated and armed guerrilla movement on terrain that suited it.

Short of a military coup and the onset of large-scale aerial bombardment, it looks as though the Slovenes, having won the battle, are on course to win the war, too.

Every day that passes without further army attacks diminishes the probability of the hardliners in Belgrade authorising a fresh onslaught. The more that likelihood recedes, the greater the international outrage would be if it happened.

The Slovenes believe that a new army assault on the republic would trigger instant diplomatic recognition of Slovenia in much of Western Europe. In that case, army action would constitute an invasion of one state by another.

In this international dimension the Slovenes have scored a triumph as important as fending off the Yugoslav army.

After a rather inept entry into the complexities of Yugoslav politics, the European Community is enmeshed in the crisis. Three months is not a long time for the Slovenes to delay independence moves, and they are likely to make sure they observe the spirit of the EC's Brioni accord to keep the Community involved. The Slovenes also showed the door, politely but firmly, to Yuli Kvit-

sinsky, the hawkish Soviet deputy foreign minister. He had been travelling around Yugoslavia over the past week arguing against the internationalisation of the crisis and holding up Mikhail Gorbachev's nine-plus-one federation plan as some kind of model for Yugoslavia.

Politically and economically Yugoslavia would be diminished and hurt by Slovenia's departure. But there is nothing, except the other Yugoslav republics' prejudices and hurt feelings, to prevent the economic links being re-forged. The Slovenes would certainly like to keep their sizeable share of the Yugoslav market.

The reason that Slovenia looks like being able to pull off self-determination is that it is self-contained and threatens no one else. It covets nobody else's land. Elsewhere in the region, the picture is very different.

If we are witnessing the beginning of the end of the Slovene crisis, the bigger Balkan contest is just getting under way, with the region's warlords making their preparations.

The first flashpoint is the area of mixed Croat-Serb settlement in Croatia, where dozens of people have already been killed in communal fighting in the past three months.

For the Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, the bottom line is that if Yugoslavia breaks up, all Serbs must live in one

state. That would mean his republic annexing about a third of Croatia, large tracts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and perhaps also Macedonia, which many Serbs regard as "south Serbia".

If the Serbs persist in this claim, Zagreb in turn demands Croatian-populated areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This dangerous game of pass the territorial parcel does not end here. If all Serbs can live in one state, why not all the 6 million Albanians divided between Albania proper, Serbia's Kosovo province and Macedonia? Then there is neighbouring

The region is not big enough to accommodate the territorial designs of its peoples

Hungary, reduced to one-third of its previous size at the same Western-led conferences that created Yugoslavia after the first world war. More than 3 million Hungarians are distributed between Slovakia and Romania, where, naturally, the nationalist movement has its eye on Romanian-populated Soviet Moldova across the River Prut.

In short, the region is not big enough to accommodate the territorial aspirations of its many rival peoples, except in rare cases like Slovenia where there

is no contradiction between sovereignty and territory.

Croatia's independence aims are obstructed by the presence of 600,000 Serbs who do not want to live in an independent Croatia and who will fight, with Belgrade's blessing and support, to prevent it.

Which is why Franjo Tudjman, president of Croatia, is desperate, as he has been making clear since January, to do a deal with Mr Milosevic, possibly entailing the carve-up of Bosnia — which ethnically is probably the most complex region in Europe.

Officials in Zagreb talk openly about a Serb-Croat territorial deal in Bosnia over the heads of the local Muslims. Such volubility is a measure of their desperation.

By contrast, the Serbs keep mum and go through the motions of negotiations, but evince little real commitment to dialogue, bargaining or peace process.

To the Brioni meeting, Mr Milosevic sent his lieutenant, Borisav Jovic, who left 11 hours before the EC-brokered peace deal was announced.

Throughout Yugoslavia's crisis of the past several months, Mr Milosevic's preferred course of action has been to disappear for long spells, keep quiet, distance himself from any resulting domestic political problems, and let the dynamic of chaos and violence work. He can do this happy in the knowledge that Serbia is bigger and stronger than its rivals when push comes to shove.