

Division of Bosnia

'could hold key'

THE GUARDIAN 13/7/91

David Hearst talks to a dissident who has lived through all the ups and downs of Yugoslav history

MILOVAN DJILAS sat by his telephone in his second floor flat in Belgrade, politely answering calls from the Western media frantic for explanation. He had a poker face and a wry twinkle in his eyes.

Yugoslavia's most eminent dissident is a man aged 80 and, unlike the rest of his countrymen, unflappable. He has been through most things in his life. He has gone from being Tito's heir apparent and the most able of three envoys sent to Stalin before the split with Moscow in 1948, to being expelled from the party, a prisoner and a dissident. He now believes that most of his countrymen have no inkling of what democracy means and will only learn the hard way.

"It is easy to be a nationalist. You do not need any time to learn how to wave a flag, and in this respect communism was just a temporary episode in our history. We were never a liberal society to start with," Mr Djilas said.

For him, there is nothing much to choose between the regimes in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade, except the motivation for their actions. Each government controls the means of information — in Croatia, more so than in Serbia — Mr Djilas said. Each is authoritarian, with a weak parliament, and a police force that kowtows to nationalist extremists who are used to raise tension and provoke incidents.

Mr Djilas paints a picture of a leaderless society, where no one can finish what they started — least of all the generals who sent the tanks into Slovenia.

Mr Djilas believes the start of a solution lies in the mountains of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a Muslim population around Sarajevo is flanked on one side by Serbs and on all others by Croats. It is here that a civil war, if it took place, could have the bloodiest consequences, as it did 50 years ago. It is also here that the crisis would have the best chance of spreading beyond Yugoslav borders. First the Muslims would rise up, then the Albanians in Kosovo

and Macedonia would do so, forcing the Albanian government to come in.

Bosnia is a land where no nationality can claim a majority and a redivision of its borders could satisfy most of its communities. Serbia has already gone some way to redrawing the ethnic boundaries by recognising as "autonomous" two regions which are Serbian dominated. The idea was that these lands would someday be annexed as part of Greater Serbia.

Croatia knows the threat that these "autonomous" regions pose. It has one in Krajina which sits on its main transport route to the Dalmatian ports. The Serbian villages in Krajina are armed to the teeth and supported by the Yugoslav army.

Croatia could compromise by offering some type of recognition which would allow the army to pull back. Such ideas are highly tentative and presuppose the leadership has the

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will to push such uncomfortable decisions through.

For Mr Djilas, the end result would be a Yugoslavia where autonomous regions would be linked in a loose confederal state. Although his country remains on the edge of a deep conflict, the old dissident takes heart from the fact that the disintegration of Yugoslavia has been such a shock to the system for both Belgrade and Zagreb.

He said "The Croats thought that independence could be achieved by some easy way. The Serbs thought they could prevent it more easily than they have. We are now in a limited civil war, and I do not think that it will be resolved in three months, but nor do I think there will be a real war."

Mr Djilas has not lost his faith in the use of force, but today he uses the word in a more ironic sense. Forced by the prospect of disaster in Bosnia, forced by Europe which itself is split, the power brokers in Croatia and Serbia will have to do a deal. "If they don't . . ." Mr Djilas leaves the alternative in the air, smiling as usual. He is not a man for whom the precipice holds any secrets.